MLB Sports Illustrated

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DOUBLE ISSUE
2017 PREVIEW
MARCH 27–APRIL 3, 2017
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How Perfect Is **Kris Bryant?**
BY TOM VERDUCCI
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Indians
The New Cubs
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Unparalleled and Unprecedented: An Oral History
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PLUS

30 Scouting Reports
Where's Your Team?

World Series Pick
Dodgers OVER **Indians**

1 IT'S YEAR A.C. (AFTER CUBS)

17 REASONS BASEBALL WILL BE GREAT IN '17
(AND BEYOND)

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Photograph by
John Cordes
Icon Sportswire/
Getty Images

SI NOW WITH HOST MAGGIE GRAY

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The two-time reigning MVP goes far off-court, addressing high school fisticuffs, high-end eating, a TV-inspired alias and . . . *Matt Barnes as a spider?*

MAGGIE GRAY: *You were sitting on the bench on March 11 in San Antonio—so fans could heckle you and you couldn't go anywhere. What's the funniest thing a fan has ever said to you to take you off your game?*
STEPH CURRY: Probably sending their five-year-old kid to ask my daughter out on a date.
MG: *That's just weird.*
SC: Yeah. Talk about throwing me off my game.
MG: *You shouldn't have to worry about Riley dating for at least another 10 years, right?*
SC: Exactly.
MATT DOLLINGER: *Is there a player in the NBA who talks the most trash to you consistently?*
SC: Nate Robinson, when he was in the league. His material was unbelievable. His voice was high-pitched, like he was yelling every time he talked. So he was hilarious whether he was talking at me or, when he was on my team, talking to the other team.
MD: *You have a new teammate who's known for talking a little bit, Matt Barnes. We're going to get this interview completely strange: Would you rather fight one Matt Barnes–sized spider or 100 spider-sized Matt Barnes?*
SC: It's a tough question, but I have to stick with one [Matt Barnes–sized spider]. One-on-one, I like my chances.
MG: *Barnes has thrown a few haymakers in his day. When was the last time you threw a punch?*
SC: Probably my senior year in high school.
MG: *And did it land?*
SC: It did. But I was retaliating. . . . So it was—like they say—a "you should see the other guy" type of situation.
MG: *Steph, when was the last time you got ID'd?*
SC: Last night, actually. I was trying to get a nice glass of wine at dinner. The waiter asked for [my wife] Ayesha's ID, so I guess I was a charity case at that point.
MD: *You're one of the most recognizable people in the world. When's the last time you had to pull the "Hey, I'm Steph Curry" card? Because that's a good card to pull.*
SC: I don't pull it often. I won't divulge the name, but [the last time I did that] I was trying to get a reservation at a very, very nice restaurant I saw on *Chef's Table* on Netflix.
MG: *Did the Steph Curry card work?*
SC: It worked.

> *"I've kept the same alias since my rookie year. I love it so much."*

MG: *When you go out, is there a disguise you have to wear? Do you put on a hat and glasses?*
SC: That's always been a question: Do the sunglasses and hat draw more attention? "Who's the weird guy wearing both?" I might take a page out of [Cristiano] Ronaldo's book. I know he's doing the disguise thing. I might have to try it.
MG: *What about an alias at hotels or restaurants? What's an alias you have used in the past?*
SC: If I tell you, I'm going to have to change it, because I've kept the same alias since my rookie year. I love it so much.
MG: *Can you give us a hint? Is it a real person? A cartoon character?*
SC: It's from the show *Entourage*. I'll leave it at that.
MD: *When was the last time you read your Twitter mentions?*
SC: About seven minutes ago. I [read them] every once in a while. I try not to get too deep, but I have to see what they're saying.

For more of Curry's interview, go to **SI.com/stephcurry**

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RITZ

NEW

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Mason: Jarring

Kansas point guard Frank Mason III delivered quite a jolt to Michigan State on Sunday. The senior had 20 points and a team-high five assists (including this nifty dime that set up a three-pointer by Lagerald Vick) as the Jayhawks—the top seed in the Midwest—beat the Spartans 90–70 in Tulsa. Freshman Josh Jackson (11) had a huge game as well, scoring 23 points, including 14 in the second half as Kansas turned a close game into a rout.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
GREG NELSON

MARCH MADNESS
SPARTANS
20
SPARTANS
SPARTANS
25
SPALDING

Wildcat-awampus

Wisconsin forward Nigel Hayes memorably introduced *catawampus* into the March Madness vernacular during the 2015 NCAA tournament. He said the word—which means "askew" or "out of alignment"—to troll the press conference stenographer. He had a more fitting reason to use it after last Saturday's game against top overall seed Villanova: Catawampus was a perfect description of many a bracketologist's feelings after the Badgers knocked off the Wildcats. (Hayes had 19 points and eight rebounds.) Villanova's 65-62 loss ensured that for the 10th consecutive year there will not be a repeat champion.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
MADDIE MEYER
GETTY IMAGES

NCAA
WISCONSIN
10
NCAA

Gamecock Of the Walk

Sindarius Thornwell had every reason to strut on Sunday. The senior guard put up a game-high 24 points as No. 7 seed South Carolina upset No. 2 Duke in the second round of the East Regional *(page 35)*. The Gamecocks made just seven of their 35 field goal attempts in the first half, but they shot 71% in the second half to coast to an 88–81 victory in front of a home-state crowd in Greenville. Before its first-round win over Marquette last Friday, South Carolina hadn't won an NCAA tournament game since 1973.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CHRIS KEANE

88
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81
#MARCHMADNESS
CAROLINA
4
CAROLINA
10
12
30

In Tom We Trust

→ BY THE EDITORS OF SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

This is our annual MLB preview issue, and as usual it's a comprehensive analysis through two essential prisms: the current state of the game, and the mind of Tom Verducci. He has meaty profiles of NL MVP Kris Bryant *(page 52)* and Dodgers manager Dave Roberts *(page 70)*, as well as shorter but equally compelling pieces on a new breed of analytical pitching coach and on the return to the U.S. of ex-big-leaguer-turned-Korean-megacelebrity Eric Thames. It's a typical Verduccian mix. No familiar subject can't be mined for fresh insight. No detail is too small, no trend too subtle, to be missed.

As conceived by baseball editor Emma Span, our preview is built on the idea that after the Cubs' world championship (perhaps you've heard) the game is entering a new epoch. The book is closed on over a century of baseball history—no more curses, no more baggage, no more looking back at the long narrative behind us. (Oh, wait. Indians.) With one of the sport's defining story lines finally finished, it's time to focus on what will make the game great for the next 100 years.

No one is better positioned to tell that story than Verducci, who knows a few things about evolving from one era to another. Since his arrival at SI in 1993, Tom has established himself as a peerless chronicler of the sport in print and online. "He's the best baseball writer ever, and I honestly don't think there's a close second," says Fox Sports writer and broadcaster Ken Rosenthal, who has known Verducci since their days as *Newsday* interns in the early '80s. "What he does actually amazes me on a fairly consistent basis."

But Verducci long ago realized that the written word wasn't the only narrative tool at his disposal. Many sportswriters have made the jump to careers in television—mostly as pundits, insiders and studio-show analysts. Over the last decade Tom has done plenty of that for the MLB Network, TBS and Fox. But he's added several degrees of difficulty that make him unique. One, he seamlessly adapted to a role as an in-booth game analyst, a leap few "writers" have made: He's called weekly games for MLB Network since 2009 and for Fox since '12, and he was in the Fox booth for the '14 and '15 World Series.

Two, he hasn't forgotten his day job as a long-form writer. The result: mind-boggling double duty such as the feat he pulled off when the Cubs finally extinguished that curse. After working Game 7 as a dugout reporter for Fox (along with Rosenthal), he captured the Cubs' historic victory in an exquisite 4,000-word SI cover story. The last out came at approximately 12:46 a.m. ET. He filed the story a mere seven hours later, in time for a special early close that had the historic issue on Chicago newsstands four days ahead of schedule. For those of you who haven't had to sum up 108 years of history and one of the greatest Game 7s on no sleep: It's hard.

That multimedia excellence is a big reason that Verducci has a stranglehold on the National Sportswriter of the Year award: The National Sports Media Association just announced that he has won it for the third straight time. (He'll pick up the hardware at the NSMA's annual event in June.) And Tom enjoyed that post-Series all-nighter so much that he essentially extended it through the holiday season. Somehow, between the Series' end in the wee hours of Nov. 3 and the first week of January, he wrote the definitive book-length, behind-the-scenes account of Chicago's rise to World Series champion. *The Cubs Way*, published by Crown Archetype, will be released on March 28.

The book details how president of baseball ops Theo Epstein, manager Joe Maddon and the rest of the Chicago brain trust worked over several years to change a franchise's culture and make a championship possible. It's no accident which writer was allowed behind the curtain. "The thing that stands out the most to me about Tom is that you trust him," says Maddon. "Trust is really, really important, and I would bet that 100% of the baseball people you speak with would say they trust Tom Verducci." □

HE REPORTS, YOU LEARN The insights Verducci shares in print and on camera come from all-access moments like his chat with Bryant immediately after Game 7 (top).

DAVID E. KLUTHO (TOP); JIM BROWN/USA TODAY SPORTS

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INBOX

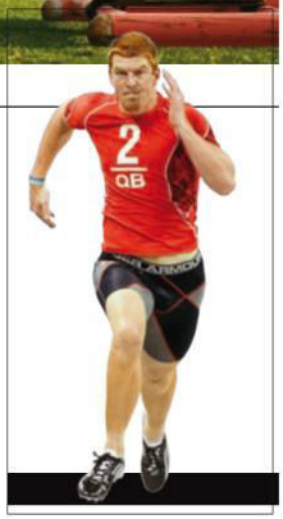
FOR MARCH 6, 2017

I'm not sure what I find more unbelievable: the size of 6' 9", 396-pound **Daniel Faalele** *(Think Big)* or the $75,200 annual tuition charged by IMG Academy.

Larry Pesch, Wauwatosa, Wis.

There is science behind the underhanded free throw, and **Canyon Barry** sounds like just the man to do the calculations *(The Common Touch)*. Using that technique, the ball reaches the basket with just enough energy to clear the front of the rim. If it isn't a clean make, the shot is so soft that it often finds its way into the hoop anyway. I suspect if Barry would prove this mathmatically as well as he does practically, more players and coaches would be converted.

George H. Phillips, Loveland, Colo.



Merely tweaking tests at the **NFL combine** won't do much *(The Unaware Olympics)*. There are aspects of being a successful pro that cannot be physically measured, such as heart and desire. Who knows—maybe even Ryan Leaf and Johnny Manziel would have done better on different teams or with different coaches.

Laurence Siegel, Manteno, Ill.

COVER

After learning that **James Harden** signed a $200 million shoe contract, I went on to read his comment *(A Simple Plan)*, "What shoes am I wearing? Who cares?" I can't help but wonder if Adidas feels like its money was well spent.

Kerry Walsh
Clinton, Ind.

PAGE 20

SCORECARD

Enough complaining about baseball's pace. Every year I go to five Reds games with three other retired teachers. We drive 90 miles each way and sit in $37 box seats. Why would we want the game to go quickly? The only people who want the game sped up are those who *have* to be there, like sportswriters.

John Lewis IV
Seymour, Ind.

Here's a quick fix for shortening games: Require relievers to pitch immediately to batters when coming in during the middle of an inning. What other sport allows practice on the field of play for a substitute entering the game?

John Cooper
Baltimore, Ohio

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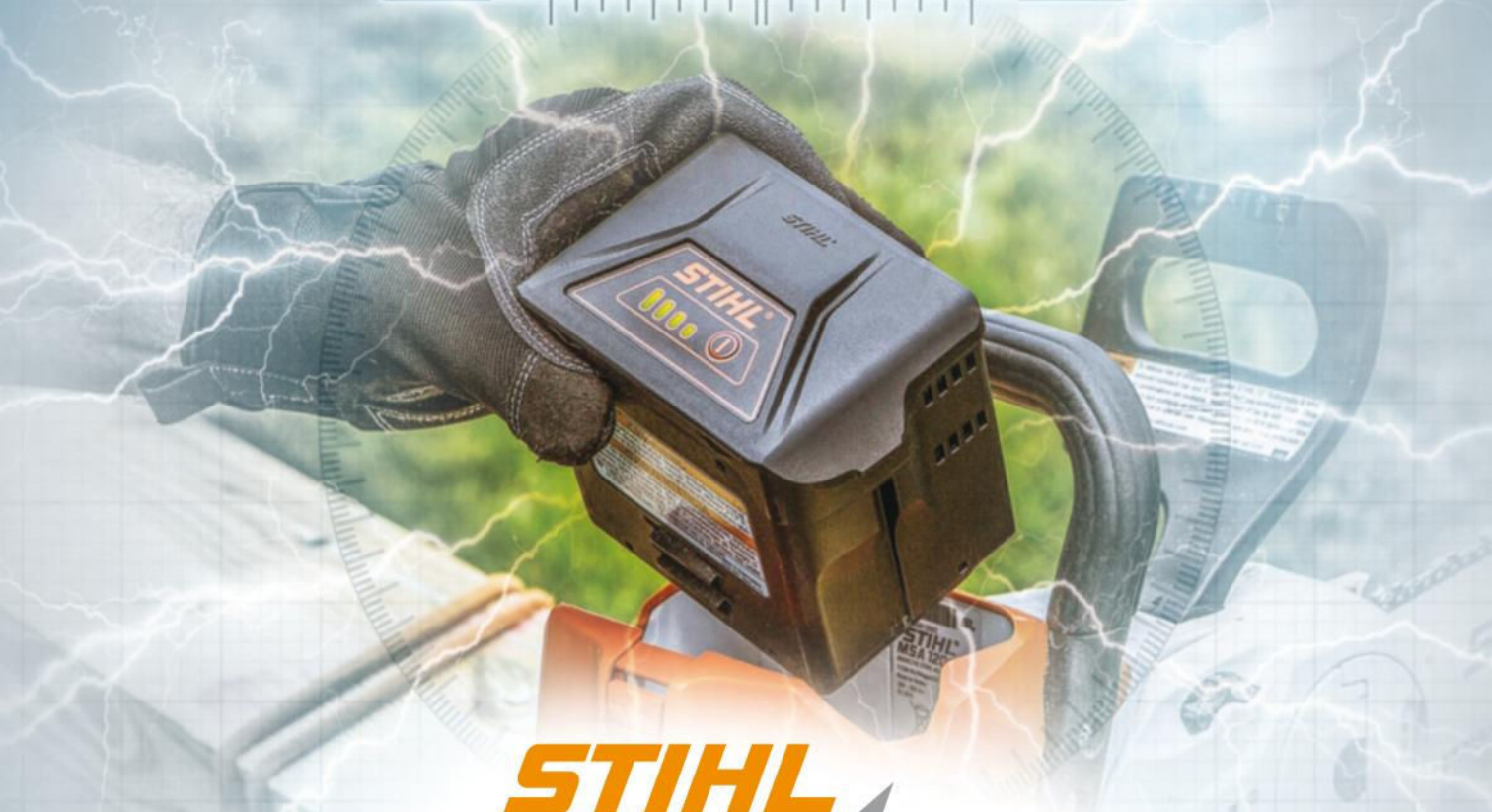

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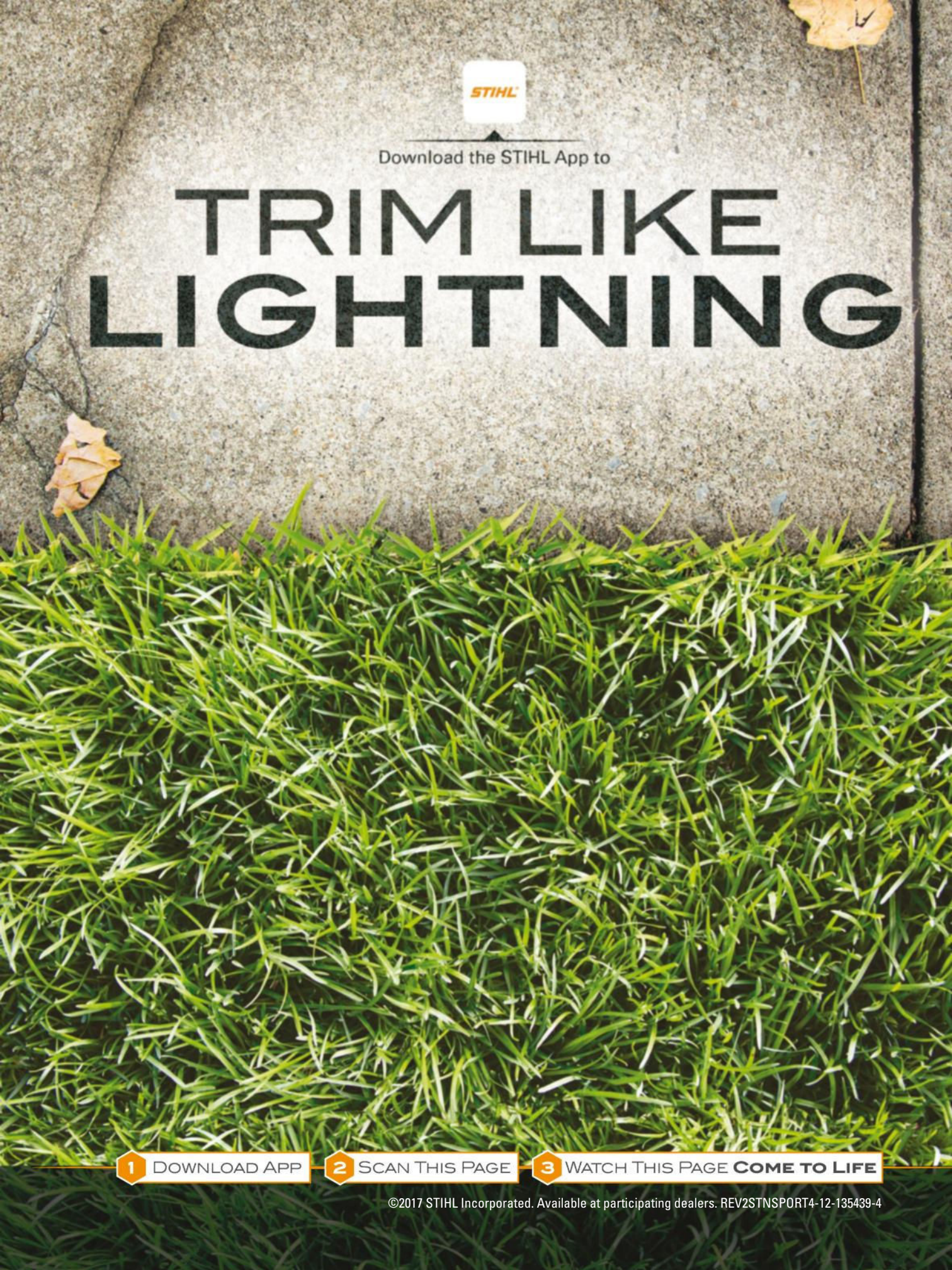
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Pulisic in Center
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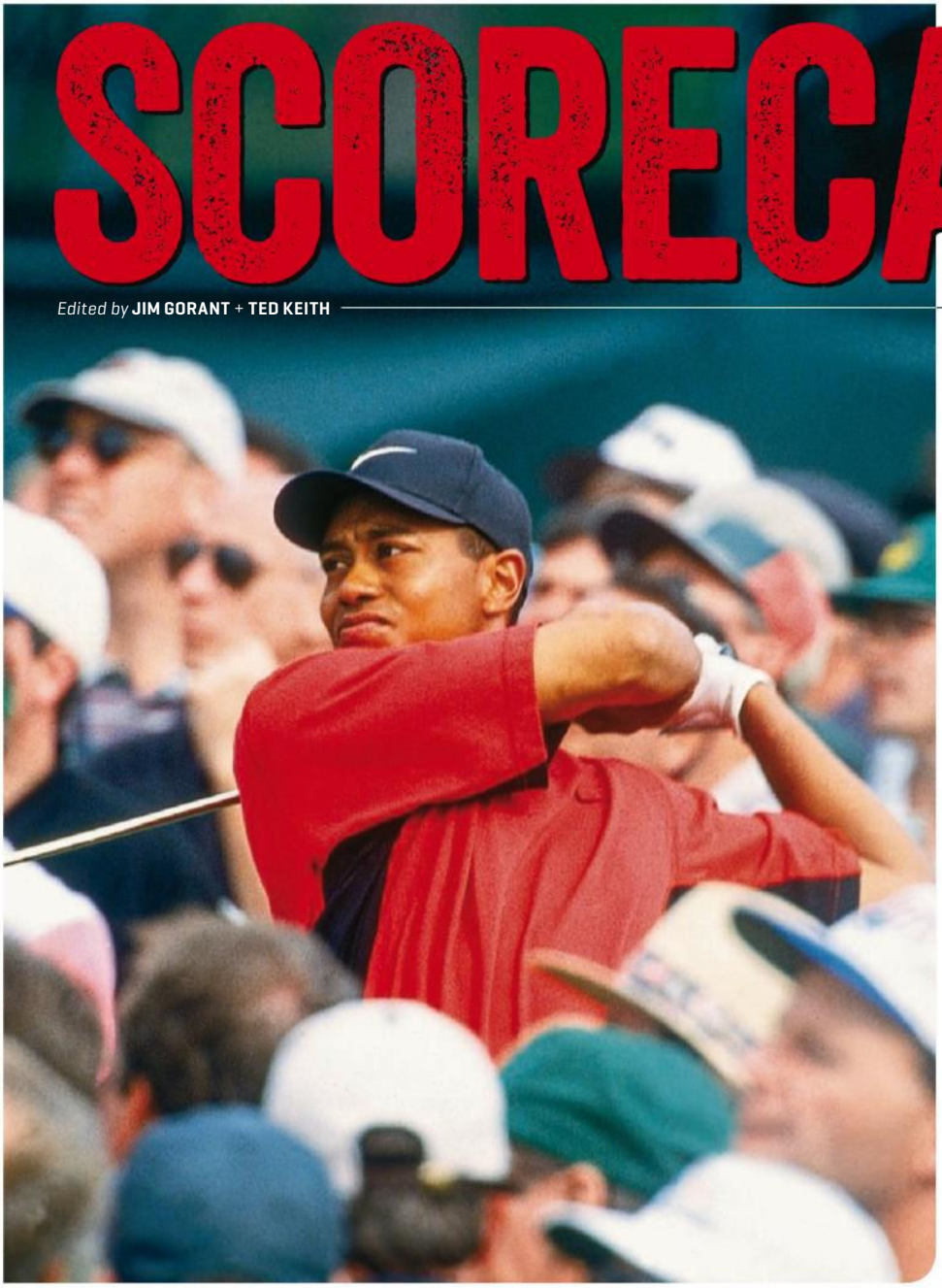
SCORECARD

Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH



JOHN IACONO

Paging Tiger

His book about the 1997 Masters reminds us that Tiger Woods has a lot to offer—but that we wish he would give us more

BY MICHAEL BAMBERGER

PHIL KNIGHT—Nike co-founder, master marketer and Tiger Woods sponsor—calls the 1997 Masters "golf's Jackie Robinson moment." Knight was there then, hanging with the protagonist, and he is mentioned three times in Woods's new book, *The 1997 Masters: My Story*.

If you are old enough, you remember it too. Twenty years later the just-the-facts summation of the week makes your heart race: Woods, competing in his first major as a pro, a 21-year-old former Stanford student with a black father and a Thai mother playing on golf's most spectacular stage, at a club that had been anything but racially progressive, won the tournament by . . . 12.

And *breathe*.

I was there—the greatest golf event I have ever attended—and now, two decades later, I had Tiger's new book in my hands, hopeful he would rise to the occasion.

Then I got to page 7, where Woods writes about Arnold Palmer and Palmer's Bay Hill tournament, which the author has won eight times, with Arnold there to greet him after the 72nd hole every time.

Woods writes, "I was sad when he died on Sept. 25,

2016, and I thought of all those times behind the eighteenth green. Arnold meant so much to the game, and I'll never forget our friendship and his counsel to me over the years. Looking back, I know he fired me up the week before the [1997] Masters."

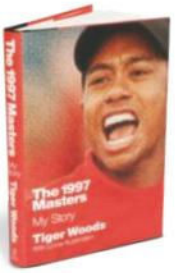
Alarms started ringing. These are sentences that should not be published in a book for sentient adults. The editor should have noted in the margin of the author's manuscript, *How, how, how, how? Show, show, show, show!* Arnold, who half-invented the tournament that defines the book, is dead. You, Tiger, have logged many hours with him, and now you're giving the man some credit for your most important victory. You cannot go too deep on this.

Instead he gives us one shaggy paragraph. I wish I could tell you that this was an isolated incident.

Still, there are many worthwhile don't-blink moments in this 230-page book. Woods, working with the thoughtful and accomplished golf writer Lorne Rubenstein, writes beautifully about his relationship with his parents, but in passing. He compares his approach to golf to improvisational jazz. (His father was a jazz buff.) There's a wonderful scene in which Tiger talks grip pressure with Byron Nelson at an Augusta National dinner. Nelson tells Tiger, "Keep doing what you're doing." It's wonderful to see Woods off the course, talking to the Augusta chairman about his pairing. His thorough dissection of what has happened to Augusta National's course, in the face of the modern golfer and bigger-faster-stronger equipment, is incisive and intelligent.

There are passages that stop you cold with their honesty. He offers a nod to his marriage that ended in divorce, the pain he wrought, his regrets. He explains that his daughter is named Sam, for his father's nickname for him, and that his son, Charlie, was named for Charlie Sifford, the pioneering black golfer who won twice on Tour but who never played in the Masters. What a tribute.

But such moments go by too fast. It was not until 1975 that a black golfer played in the Masters. It was not until '90 that a black man joined Augusta National. That's why Knight invokes Jack Roosevelt Robinson when talking about the '97 Masters. The event is important because of Woods's extraordinary background, because of who he is, because of how we perceive him. Then, he was a mixed-race kid playing spectacular golf, and we all tuned in. But now he is an author, a middle-aged man with two children and eroding golf skills. He's knocking on *our* door, book in hand. His job is to take us deep. Maybe Andre Agassi set the bar too high with *Open*. What Tiger's book lacks is introspection.



He's a middle-aged man with eroding golf skills. **He's knocking on *our* door,** book in hand. His job is to take us deep.

This will sound condescending, but it is not meant that way: The ideal audience for this book is middle-schoolers, young people interested in learning about the sacrifice it takes to become excellent at a difficult task, readers who do not already know Tiger's story from the 1997 Masters.

The book does not open with a dedication. But, in a sense, the dedication is obvious. Here is the first paragraph of the acknowledgments at the end of the book: "Thanks to Mom and Pop for showing me what's important and for standing by me, whatever was going on in my life. My kids, Sam and Charlie, continue to teach me how to be the best dad I can be, and the best person I can be, day in and day out." Beautiful.

Sam is nine and Charlie is eight. This book will surely be in their big house in South Florida, waiting for them to come of age. It's a start. □

GO FIGURE

600

Premier League wins in history for Manchester United, which beat Middlesbrough 3-1 on Sunday to become the first side to reach that milestone. Arsenal is second, with 517 victories.

89

Point margin of victory for Baylor over Texas Southern in the first round of the NCAA women's basketball tournament, the biggest in tournament history. The Bears, the No. 1 seed in the Oklahoma City Regional, rolled to a 119-30 win over the 16th-seeded Tigers.

0

Hits allowed by the Yankees in a 3-0 exhibition game win against the Tigers last Friday, New York's first nine-inning spring training no-hitter in 34 years and the first in the majors since 2015.

ROBBIE JAY BARRATT/AMA/GETTY IMAGES (MANCHESTER UNITED); JERRY LARSON/AP (BAYLOR); MARK CUNNINGHAM/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (TANAKA)

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NCAA BASKETBALL
+

Cheer to Eternity

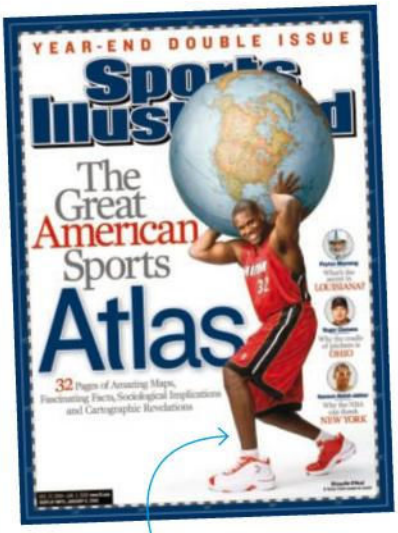
Tourney rewind

WHEN DAYTON'S season ended with its 64–58 loss to Wichita State in the NCAA tournament last week, 70-year-old Carol Gallagher was disappointed. The former Flyers cheerleader had received some attention last week after the SI Vault Twitter account posted a photo of her *(above, far left)* from the 1967 championship game between UCLA and Dayton at Freedom Hall in Louisville.

That game didn't go well for Dayton either (the Flyers lost to the undefeated Bruins 79–64), but Gallagher has a memory from that day of her encounter with the national player of the year. "I was entering the lobby of the hotel where both UCLA and Dayton were staying. I had my uniform on and wanted to change. As I entered the lobby, the UCLA team was there and someone yelled, 'Hey, there's a Dayton cheerleader!' They kind of surrounded me, and I must have looked startled or scared because Kareem stepped up and said, 'Leave the little girl alone.' He then escorted me to the elevator and rode up to my floor to see that I got there safely. Yes, he was nice. Very quiet. Also very polite to people who approached him as we walked through the lobby to the elevator."

Gallagher, who splits her time between Minnesota and Florida, recalls wondering what photos would commemorate the game. "I remember thinking [publications] would never show us in our Catholic-school-modest long-sleeved uniforms and long skirts because the UCLA cheerleaders were so cute in their little short uniforms," she says. As for the photo, disseminated on March 9, Gallagher says, "I had no idea the picture even existed. I sent it to Dan Sadlier [one of the Flyers players] last week and he said, 'Did they even have color film back then?' "

—Andy Gray



Rounding Error

There's a basketball team of doubters forming, and it's looking for one more player

LAST WEEK Shaquille O'Neal joined the Flat Earth All-Stars, a contingent of current and former NBA players who don't believe our planet is, well, a planet. That this is demonstrably untrue seems to matter little. More interesting is that so far the pre-Columbusites are putting together a nice squad, though it's safe to say they won't call themselves the Globetrotters.

SHAQUILLE O'NEAL
Center
Odds he's trolling: 49%
Money quote:
"I drive from Florida to California all the time, and it's flat to me."

KYRIE IRVING
Point Guard
Odds he's trolling: 20%
Money quote:
"This is not even a conspiracy theory. The Earth is flat."

WILSON CHANDLER
Small Forward
Odds he's trolling: 5%
Money quote:
"Just walk outside and use your five senses."

DRAYMOND GREEN
Power Forward
Odds he's trolling: 50%
Money quote:
"The world is flat fool." (on Twitter)

NEIL LEIFER (CHEERLEADERS); PETER GREGOIRE (O'NEAL); MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (IRVING); GARRETT W. ELLWOOD/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (CHANDLER); NOAH GRAHAM/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (GREEN)

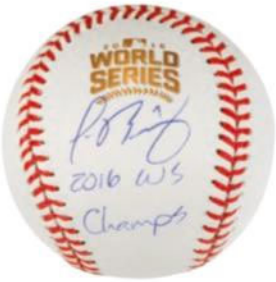
EXTRA MUSTARD

Money for Something

ACCORDING TO Vivid Seats, the hottest game on the MLB spring training schedule is the World Series rematch: Indians-Cubs on Friday at Chicago's Sloan Park in Mesa, Ariz. The average ticket is selling for $200. It seems worth pointing out that the game does not count. Also, the cheapest seat for the NCAA men's basketball final, 30 miles away in Phoenix, was going for only $218 at the start of the week on Vivid Seats. But it did get us thinking: What else could a baseball fan buy with $200? —*Stephanie Apstein*

Five Cubs World Series champions **tiki figurines** *($34.99)*

12 copies of the SPORTS ILLUSTRATED PRESENTS **2016 Cubs commemorative** issue *($15.99)*



One **Javier Báez signed ball** with a World Series logo *($199.99)*

Three **no-parking signs** stolen from the blocks surrounding Wrigley Field during the World Series *($59.99)*

10 **Anthony Rizzo World Series champion garden gnomes** *($19.99)*

THEY SAID IT

"WHAT THEY KNOW COULD NOT BLOW UP A SMALL BALLOON."

Jim Harbaugh // Michigan coach, suggesting similarities between the administrators who fired his brother-in-law, Tom Crean, at Indiana, and those who manage his former employer, the 49ers.

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

After scoring twice in a game on March 17, South Africa–based soccer player Mohammed Anas thanked his wife—and his girlfriend.

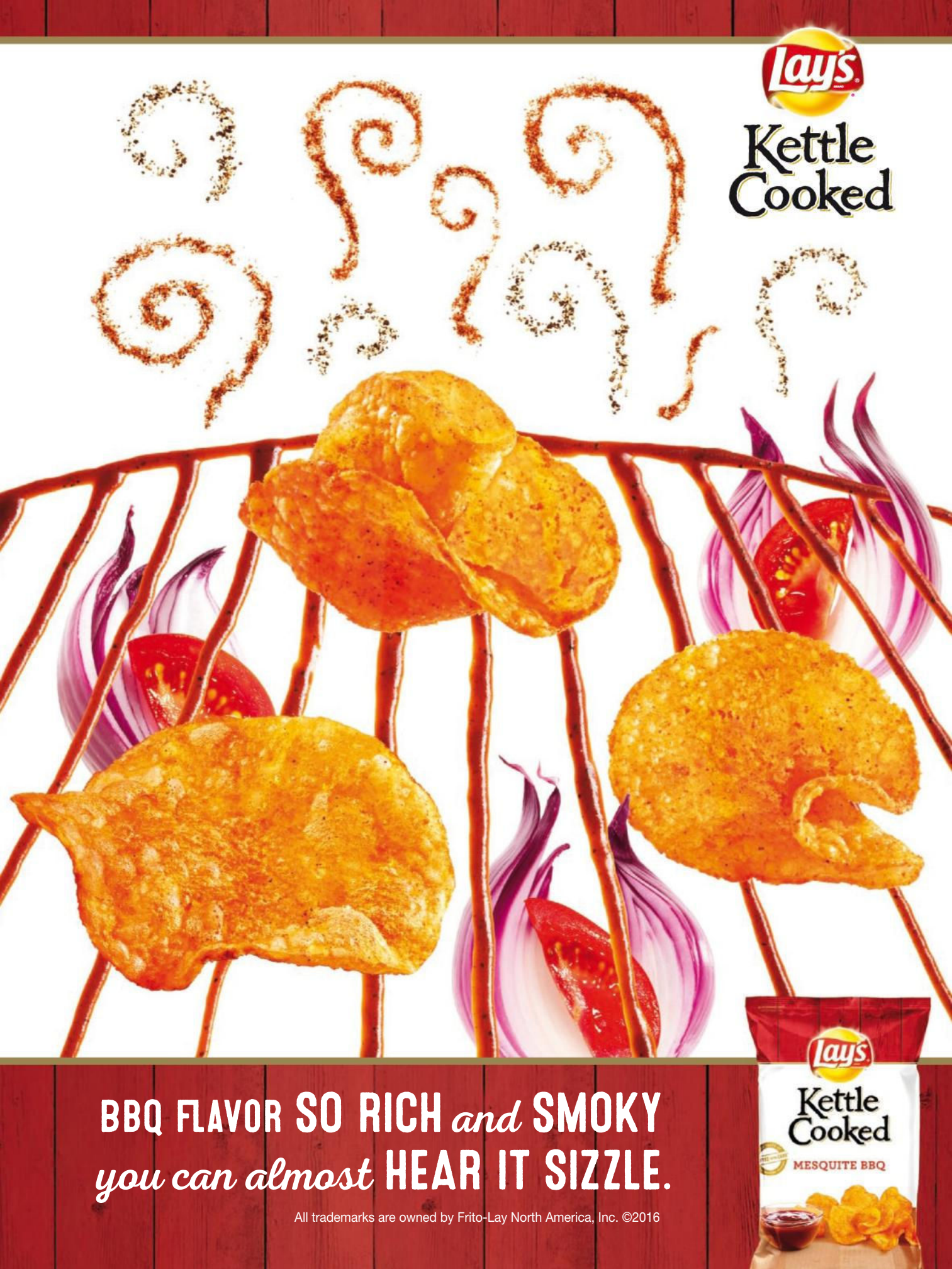
Colin Kaepernick
The free-agent QB joined an effort to provide 60 tons of food to famine-stricken Somalia. That's making a stand.

HOT ▲

NOT ▼

Nick Foles
If he's on the Eagles in year three of his five-year deal, the contract voids. At the coin toss he yells, "Heads you win, tails I lose."

CLARK TOYS (TIKI FIGURINES); EBAY (SIGN); FANATICS (BALL); PINTEREST (GNOMES); JEFF HAYNES (HARBAUGH); JEFFREY T. BARNES/AP (KAEPERNICK); CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES (FOLES)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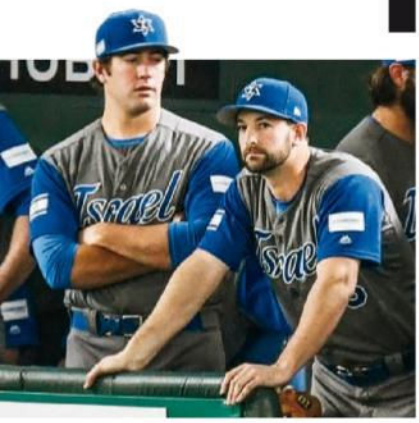

FAUXBITUARY

Team Israel 2017-17

The 2017 incarnation of Israeli baseball perished from the earth on March 15, when the squad representing the country at the World Baseball Classic lost to Japan 8–3. Team Israel, which upset both Cuba and South Korea, delighted American Jews but brought as much oy as joy to the homeland; Israel has one dedicated baseball field and about 1,000 players, and with just two Israeli citizens on the roster, the team's success at the WBC passed with a whimper. The games were not televised and Miri Regev, the Minister of Culture and Sport, claimed not to know every player. Israel will try to qualify for the 2020 Olympics, but fans, like their counterparts in America, will most likely be too focused on gymnastics to notice. —J.F.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by **JEREMY FUCHS**

Osama Khalifa | *Cairo* | *Squash*

Khalifa, a junior at Columbia, defeated Rochester's Mario Yanez 11–1, 11–6, 11–5 in Hanover, N.H., to win the first national squash title in school history. Khalifa, a three-time first-team All-America and the 2016 Ivy League player of the year, joined his brother, Amr, as an NCAA champion; Amr won his title with St. Lawrence in '13.

Sammy Watson | *Henrietta, N.Y.* | *Track and Field*

Sammy, a senior at Rush-Henrietta High, set the high school indoor 800-meter record at the Millrose Games in New York City. She ran a 2:01.78, beating Mary Decker's 43-year-old mark of 2:01.80. A month later Sammy broke her own high school record in the 1,000 at the U.S. indoor championships in Albuquerque, finishing in 2:40.72.

Yul Moldauer | *Arvada, Colo.* | *Gymnastics*

Moldauer, a sophomore at Oklahoma, won the all-around at the American Cup in Newark, with a score of 85.931, beating Rio all-around silver medalist Oleg Verniaiev of Ukraine by 0.232 points. Last year Moldauer became the second freshman to win the NCAA all-around title. He also finished second on parallel bars and third on floor exercises.

Alexis Osorio | *Riverside, Calif.* | *Softball*

Osorio, a junior righthander at Alabama, threw a perfect game against Coastal Carolina, striking out a school-record 19. It was the fourth perfect game in Tide history. The next game, a day later against Towson, she pitched 4⅔ perfect innings in relief, with six K's. Through 85⅓ innings Osorio has a 0.82 ERA and 172 strikeouts.

Theresa Michalak | *Halle, Germany* | *Swimming*

Michalak, a senior at West Florida, won four titles at the Division II championships in Birmingham: the 50-yard freestyle (22.79), 100 breaststroke (59.51), 100 butterfly (52.33) and 100 freestyle (48.44). Michalak, a 2012 Olympian and '16 first team All-America, is the 14th swimmer to win four events at the D-II championship.

Matt Bonds | *Accokeek, Md.* | *Basketball*

Bonds, a 6' 5" senior forward at Division II St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vt., had 14 rebounds in a 66–63 win over New Haven to become the second player to surpass the 1,000 mark in 2016-17. The D-II leader in offensive boards as a junior (4.3), he finished the year as the Purple Knights' leading scorer (21.7) and rebounder (12.4).

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For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@SI_Faces** on Twitter.

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The Case for . . .

Christian in The Middle

BY GRANT WAHL

THIS WEEK THE best U.S. men's soccer player of 2017, 18-year-old Christian Pulisic, parachutes into North America for two pressure-packed U.S. games: against Honduras on Friday in San Jose, and at Panama next Tuesday. Qualifying for an eighth straight World Cup is in jeopardy after losses to Mexico and Costa Rica in November, defeats that caused a change in coaches from Jurgen Klinsmann to Bruce Arena. After two games the U.S. is in last place in CONCACAF's six-team, 10-match final-round tournament, from which the top three (and perhaps four) teams will advance to Russia 2018. A win at home on Friday is paramount, and much of the U.S.'s attacking verve is expected to come from Pulisic. In light of this urgency, Arena should play Pulisic in a central attacking role from the start.

Over the last 18 months Pulisic has undergone a breathtaking rise. He broke into the first team of Germany's Borussia Dortmund in early 2016 and scored his first U.S. goal last May (the night after hiring a private plane to take him back home to his prom in Hershey, Pa.). He has only kept climbing since. Pulisic has five goals and eight assists in 31 matches this season for Dortmund, and on March 8 he produced the decisive goal that sent his team to the Champions League quarterfinals—the biggest goal ever scored by an American on the Continent.

U.S. fans are reflexively skeptical about emerging soccer talents in the men's game—Freddy Adu did TV ads with Pelé at age 14 but never went on to play in a World Cup, much less become the nation's first male soccer superstar. So far, at least, Pulisic shows every sign of being the real thing, a dynamic attacker with speed and vision who has the finishing instinct of an assassin. Merely becoming a regular for one of the world's top 10 clubs and providing a game-changing Champions League assist against Real Madrid already puts Pulisic in a group of one among American players all-time.

The looming question for the U.S., though, is where Pulisic will play. He has started wide for much of the season with Dortmund, but in recent weeks he has moved to a more central role that diminishes his defensive assignments. Pulisic himself prefers to play in a central number 10 role—he wears 10 for the U.S., and his Twitter handle is @cpulisic_10—and most observers think that eventually he'll be a fixture in that part of the American formation.

> The 18-year-old Pulisic shows every sign of being **the real thing for the U.S., a dynamic attacker** with speed and vision.

But will it be this week? Klinsmann started Pulisic centrally against Mexico in November, but the Mexicans sliced through the U.S.'s back line so frequently that Klinsmann scrapped the idea in the first half. That wasn't Pulisic's fault—the blame goes to the poorly organized and executed defense—which is why Arena should unleash the 18-year-old centrally now, preferably playing ahead of Michael Bradley in a 4-1-3-2 formation.

Reached in his L.A. office last week, Arena was asked if Pulisic was better out wide or in the middle. "I actually think it's both," Arena said. "We're going to see his comfort level when he gets into camp and talk to him a little bit. . . . He's demonstrated at a young age that he's capable of getting the job done in a lot of positions. With our team, at the moment I'm on a computer doing that with the options of him playing at both spots and organizing our team accordingly."

The image of the 65-year-old Arena tinkering with lineups on his computer just like the rest of us soccer geeks is a fun one. But when the whistle blows on Friday night in San Jose, there will be little margin for error. □

SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY IMAGES

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THIS FEBRUARY, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED Celebrated its launch like never before with multiday festivities in New York City and Houston, including the first-ever two-day music, food and culture festival – VIBES by Sports Illustrated Swimsuit.

On Thursday, Feb. 16, SI live-streamed from the red carpet at the Swimsuit Launch Event at Center 415 in NYC. On Friday, SI Swimsuit landed in Houston, and kicked off the weekend with a daytime culinary experience with models and fans at Avenida Houston.

Taking over Post HTX in downtown Houston, VIBES began Friday evening with a food festival featuring favorites curated by Chris Shepherd and well-known regional chefs. The night culminated with a performance by R&B sensation Miguel, followed by a VIP after-party at the Four Seasons, the official host hotel of Swimsuit launch week.

On Saturday fans turned out to meet the models, get autographs, listen to a lineup of local Houston musical acts and check out fun partner activations throughout the day. Saturday night featured a mind-blowing headline performance by GRAMMY™ Award-winning artist Diplo.

Throughout the week Sports Illustrated Swimsuit celebrated beauty with its official launch partners DIRECTV NOW, Edge, Lexus, Smirnoff and Visit Houston.

CURRENT AND FORMER COVER MODELS HAILEY CLAUSON, NINA AGDAL, ASHLEY GRAHAM AND KATE UPTON HOST A PANEL FOR FANS AT VIBES

SAM HOOPES HITS THE RED CARPET AT THE NYC LAUNCH EVENT

THE SI SWIMSUIT MODELS TAKE THE STAGE WITH DIPLO DURING HIS EPIC PERFORMANCE IN FRONT OF A PACKED CROWD AT VIBES

THREE-TIME SI SWIMSUIT COVER MODEL KATE UPTON SIZZLES ON THE RED CARPET

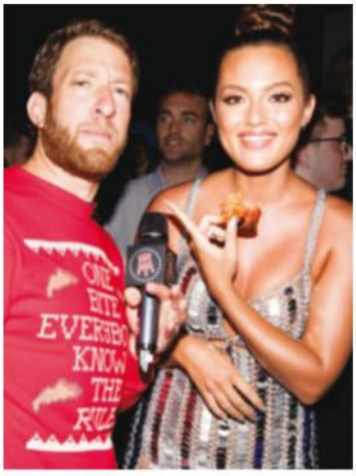
SAILOR BRINKLEY, CHRISTIE BRINKLEY, CHRISSY TEIGEN AND JOHN LEGEND ENJOYING THE LAUNCH WEEK FESTIVITIES

MIGUEL PERFORMS FRIDAY NIGHT AT VIBES IN HOUSTON

SI'S EDITOR IN CHIEF CHRIS STONE, COVER MODEL KATE UPTON AND SI SWIMSUIT EDITOR MJ DAY POSE WITH ALL THREE COVERS

BO KRSMANOVIC, ROSE BERTRAM, SAM HOOPES AND ROBYN LAWLEY

HANNAH JETER SHOWS OFF HER BABY BUMP ON THE RED CARPET



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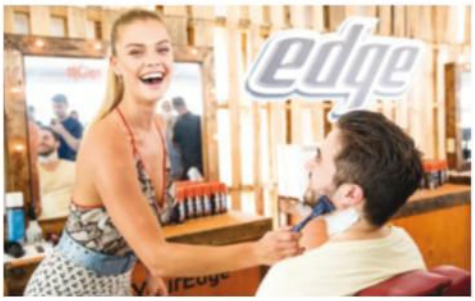


NINA AGDAL SHOWS A LUCKY FAN HOW TO #GETYOUREDGE IN THE EDGE READY ROOM AT VIBES

MYLA DALBESIO TREATED FANS TO A CULINARY DEMO WITH TRUCK ALONGSIDE CELEBRATED HOUSTON CHEFS

CHRISSY TEIGEN, MJ DAY AND ROOKIE OF THE YEAR BIANCA BALTI SHARE A LAUGH AT THE SMIRNOFF BAR AT VIBES

KATE UPTON & HAILEY CLAUSON SIGN AUTOGRAPHS FOR FANS IN THE DIRECTV NOW LOUNGE

HANNAH FERGUSON POSES ALONGSIDE THE LEXUS DISPLAY ON THE RED CARPET

PHOTOS BY: TAYLOR BALLANTYNE, NICHOLAS HUNT, BOB LEVEY/GETTY IMAGES, RICK KERN/GETTY IMAGES, TRISH BADGER PHOTOGRAPHY, @ELMNT.LA

CAPTAIN'S ORDERS
Walton (with ball), who called a team meeting in January to right Michigan's course, guided the upset of Louisville.

NCAA Tournament (2017)

High TAKES

ONCE THE MADNESS STARTS, NO ONE CAN PREDICT WHAT (A NEAR PLANE CRASH?) OR WHO (A SOUL-SEARCHING SENIOR?) WILL MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

BY PETE THAMEL

Photograph by **Joe Robbins/Getty Images**

MICHIGAN COACH John Beilein begins his clandestine mission by peeking around the corner into the locker room at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis. He tucks his Super Soaker close to his side before sprinting to the middle of the room to fire away. His attempted ambush proves futile—the players douse him with bottles of water, eventually enveloping him in a soggy mosh pit of jumping, screaming and celebrating.

That scene was nearly unimaginable two months ago, when the Wolverines' record was 11–6 and 1–3 in the Big Ten. But their rapid-fire evolution from NIT candidate to Final Four threat is a testament to how much can be accomplished with a drastic shift in mind-set. Having survived a scary plane accident, Michigan—especially senior point guard Derrick Walton Jr.—has become adept at embracing the moment. Despite the giddy locker room, their 73–69 victory over No. 2 Louisville on Sunday to clinch a spot in the Sweet 16 felt more like an inevitability than an upset.

"IT DOESN'T MATTER IF I MAKE THEM ALL," WALTON SAYS OF HIS INCREASED CONFIDENCE IN HIS SHOT. **"I'M GOING TO MAKE THE BIG ONES,** I KNOW THAT."

Before the Wolverines became the best story of this postseason, they lost at Illinois 85–69 on Jan. 12 and got called out as "white collar" by Illinois senior center Maverick Morgan. Soon after, Walton Jr. stormed into the office of Greg Harden. While Harden's title is executive associate athletic director, he's best known around Ann Arbor as the Whisperer. Harden knows what makes athletes tick—and Walton was ticked. "He was pissed to the highest level of pissivity," Harden says.

"This is totally unacceptable," Walton told Harden. "I'm going to call a team meeting." In a hotel room a few nights later before a home game with Nebraska, Walton vowed to shoot more, think less and become the dominant offensive player Michigan desperately needed. "John Beilein told him that he needed an alpha dog," Harden says. "The alpha surfaced and started biting folks in the ass."

The emergence of Walton & Co. can be

CARDINALS, RULED Forwards D.J. Wilson (5) and Zak Irvin celebrated the Wolverines' first trip to the Sweet 16 since 2014.

considered the latest success story for Harden, who for 31 years has been a counselor and life coach to Michigan's athletes. When wide receiver Desmond Howard was a frustrated sophomore looking to transfer, Harden told him the coaches at another school would be "the same people in different school colors." Howard stuck around and won the Heisman Trophy in 1991. Tom Brady walked into Harden's office when he was buried on the depth chart after losing 25 pounds because of acute appendicitis. "He was miserable, negative and depressed," Harden says. While Harden couldn't help Brady win the starting job, he told him, "I can help you believe that no one is more qualified than you." Two years later Brady led Michigan to an Orange Bowl victory.

Harden helped guide Michael Phelps through a rebellious phase in the mid-2000s while the swimmer was working as a volunteer assistant swim coach under Bob Bowman. Harden wasn't afraid to tell Phelps, " 'As good as you are, you still haven't given 100% for 100% of the time.' "

Telling stories in a dining room that doubles as his makeshift office in an Indianapolis hotel, the 67-year-old Harden gently smacks a reporter's leg to accentuate a point. He has won a national football title with Lloyd Carr, crossed paths with Jim Harbaugh as both a player and coach, and served as the administrator for the water polo, swimming and diving teams, despite barely being able to stay afloat. "He keeps it real with kids," Beilein says, "and they love that."

HARDEN HAD been working with Walton since he arrived from Chandler Park Academy in Harper Woods, Mich. His issues revolved around perfectionism and an inclination to defer rather than direct or dominate. If Walton missed a few shots, for instance, he would just stop shooting. That

SAM RICHE/TNS/ABACA (MICHIGAN); CHRIS KEANE (THORNWELL)

ONE TO CROW ON

LED BY A TWO-WAY STAR AND A JOURNEYMAN COACH, **SOUTH CAROLINA** PULLS OFF A SHOCKER

THE 2016-17 season was supposed to be a rebuilding project for South Carolina. The Gamecocks lost their starting frontcourt from a team that barely missed the '16 NCAA tournament, despite a 15-0 start. They supplanted those defections with seven new scholarship players, including two junior college transfers. Yet optimism remained because of two mainstays: Sindarius Thornwell *(left)*, a 6' 5" senior guard who was the nation's best two-way player this season, and Frank Martin, the scowling, stomping, 50-year-old basketball journeyman who was entering his fifth season in Columbia, the year that's make-or-break for many college coaches.

Not even Martin could have imagined that South Carolina, which had not won an NCAA tournament game in 44 years, would upset No. 2-seeded Duke 88-81 on Sunday in Greenville, S.C., to reach the Sweet 16. Credit much of that victory to Thornwell, who had game highs of 24 points and five assists after dropping 29 points on Marquette in the opener. Regardless of what happens in New York City this week, Martin has ensured his legacy at South Carolina. The question is, can he keep up the winning—and can the school keep him around long enough to find out how much more he can accomplish?

The short-term answers should be yes and yes. Thornwell, the SEC player of the year, will be graduating, as will the team's third-leading scorer, 6' 2" senior guard Duane Notice. The team's second-leading scorer, 6' 6" sophomore guard P.J. Dozier (13.8 points per game), might enter the NBA draft this spring. Should he return, he will rejoin a roster that will have two sophomores who started as freshmen as well as three other key reserves who will be juniors. Martin is never going to compete with Kentucky coach John Calipari for McDonald's All-Americans—his highest-rated incoming recruit is David Beatty, a 6' 3" guard from Philadelphia and a top 150 prospect—but he long ago proved his ability to spot the sorts of underappreciated players who can thrive under his exacting style.

The larger question is whether an elite program will try to poach Martin. Last year South Carolina extended his contract through 2022 and bumped his salary to $2.5 million, making him one of the four best-paid coaches in the SEC. The school might give him another raise, but Martin knows that as long as he stays at South Carolina, he will enjoy a level of compensation and security that very few in his profession experience. Now that he has shown that he can win big with the Gamecocks, he might as well hang around and keep on winning. *—Seth Davis*

changed after the Illini loss: Since then he has averaged 18.3 points, a jump of 6.2.

Against the Cardinals, Walton shot 3 for 13 and scored just 10 points, his lowest output in a month. But with 29.4 seconds left, he lofted a righthanded layup over 6' 7" forward Deng Adel high off the glass for a four-point lead. "It doesn't matter if I make them all," he says. "I'm going to make the big ones, I know that."

At least now he does. Walton credits Harden with encouraging him to look beyond the basketball court. "What type of man do you want to be remembered as?" Harden would ask. "[What's] your legacy, and how do you want to leave things and walk into new things?"

That talk of the big picture resonated even more on the eve of the Big Ten tournament, when high winds forced Michigan's team plane to abort its takeoff from Willow Run Airport. The plane, which was reportedly going 150 mph, slid off the runway and crashed through a fence, stopping just short of a ravine. (The FAA is still investigating the incident.) Walton got clipped in the knee by an emergency door and needed five stitches. When athletic director Warde Manuel heard about the accident, among his first calls was to Harden, who put a plan in place for mental health professionals from the athletic department and campus to meet with the players, band members, cheerleaders and the coaching staff. "Derrick was shook," Harden says. "He was in pain. He had stitches. He had some serious thinking to do about whether he wanted to get back on the plane."

"HE KEEPS IT REAL WITH KIDS," BEILEIN (ABOVE, LEFT) SAYS OF THE MENTAL TRAINING HARDEN DOES WITH THE TEAM, **"AND THEY LOVE THAT."**

The Wolverines forged ahead, deciding to fly into Washington, D.C., on the morning of the tournament, then dispatching Illinois, Purdue, Minnesota and Wisconsin in four consecutive days. In lifting Michigan to its first Big Ten tournament title since 1998, Walton, the alpha dog personified, averaged 20.5 points and 6.3 assists and was named Most Outstanding Player. "The two best things that have happened to this team are the Illinois loss and the plane crash," Harden says. "You talk about an amazing transformation."

"Captain Walton," says assistant coach Jeff Meyer. "He wouldn't let the ship go down."

The way Walton is playing, his biggest problem won't be navigating the choppy waters of the tournament, but avoiding the jet stream from his coach's squirt gun. □

BUCKETS BRIGADE While 'Zona did fine without him, the 6' 5" Trier has been able to provide a needed lift when the offense stalls.

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (BEILEIN)

Ready SET, ZO!

AFTER BEING SUSPENDED FOR HALF THE SEASON, GUARD ALLONZO TRIER HAS RESUMED HIS HIGH-SCORING WAYS FOR THE WILDCATS

BY LUKE WINN

Photographs by **John W. McDonough**

THE 12-PASSENGER rental van was parked outside, already packed with all of Allonzo Trier's clothes and his vast collection of basketball sneakers. He didn't want to waste any more of the evening celebrating his high school graduation. He just wanted to get to college. And so on May 14, 2015, at the conclusion of the diploma dinner Findlay Prep held for its five seniors at the Main Street Casino in Las Vegas, Trier and his mother, Marcie, and her fiancé, Derick Doss, hopped in the van and hit the road, heading southeast through the desert. It was approximately 8:30 p.m. when they started, and stopping only for gas and bathroom breaks, they arrived at Arizona's campus around 3:30 a.m.

Trier grabbed four hours of sleep, then got up to begin the process—starting with a physical and a blood test—of getting cleared to train with the Wildcats. "Allonzo has been raised to be an all-or-nothing kid," says Marcie. "For him, there was no thought of taking any time off; it was all about getting prepared for what was ahead."

Two years later, as the starting two guard in Arizona's quest to make its first Final Four since 2001, the 6' 5" Trier is not always the star—that is often Finnish 7-footer Lauri Markkanen—but he is what's known as a bucket-getter, the guy coach Sean Miller calls on to create shots when the offense stagnates. That was the case against No. 7 seed Saint Mary's in the second round in Salt Lake City, where Trier delivered nine of the Wildcats' 11 points in a late-second-half run that turned a two-point deficit into a seven-point lead and sealed a 69–60 victory. That extended what Trier calls "the toughest season of my life," in which he was forced to do something entirely unnatural: wait, indefinitely, to get on the court.

For their 2016–17 opener on Nov. 11, the Wildcats flew to Honolulu to play Michigan State in the Armed Forces Classic. The game had a fittingly classic finish, with senior point guard Kadeem Allen going coast-to-coast for a tiebreaking layup with 1.9 seconds left. After the buzzer sounded on Arizona's 65–63 win, Allen was mobbed by most of his teammates, but Trier was not among them. He was

3,000 miles away in his apartment in Tucson, watching the game on his couch along with one of his roommates, sophomore student manager Eli Friedman. After Allen hit that layup, Trier jumped up and ran around the apartment celebrating, but the rest of the game, Friedman says, "was so hard for him to watch. He's the ultimate gym rat, and you could tell: He was itching to play."

Trier was fully healthy but was not allowed to travel with the team or to play in games. He was mired in what Miller would later describe as "a once-in-a-lifetime situation."

THAT SITUATION began last off-season, after Trier chose not to declare for the NBA draft following a freshman season in which he averaged 14.8 points. In May his mother helped him lease his first car, a white 2016 Mustang with a black top. Trier was thrilled to finally have a way to get around Tucson—until Sept. 1 when the Mustang was totaled in a front-end collision that Marcie calls "a serious accident, the kind of scary thing that makes you not take your life for granted."

Later in September, according to SI's sources, Trier was subjected to a random drug test by the NCAA, which informed him in October that he'd tested positive for a performance-enhancing drug. "I was shocked," he says, "because I had no clue how it was in my system. I was like, What do you mean? There's no possible way." Gradually, he says, he pieced it together: Following the car accident, someone whom he called (in a January statement released to the media) "a well-intentioned but misguided person not associated with the University [of Arizona]" gave him a banned substance in hopes of aiding his recovery. Trier declined to reveal what the PED was, but says, "I had no idea that I had taken anything wrong."

According to NCAA rules, first-time PED offenders lose one year of eligibility and are unable to compete for 365 days from the date of the test. Trier—who, as he puts it, "lost my car and then was being told I'd lost my season"—appealed and successfully persuaded the NCAA that he had ingested the substance unknowingly. On Dec. 3 he was allowed to begin traveling with the Wildcats . . . but he was suspended from games until the PED was fully out of his system.

AFTER SPENDING MUCH OF HIS HOOPS CAREER AS **AN AHEAD-OF-SCHEDULE PROSPECT,** TRIER PROVED HE COULD PLAY CATCH-UP.

For more than two months—in which the Wildcats went 17–2—Trier's season consisted of practice, regular drug tests and shooting workouts with student managers serving as rebounders. Trier tried to maintain a tough face around teammates but often broke down late at night, when he was alone. "I just never knew if it was going to end," he says.

On Jan. 20, the day between games at USC and UCLA, the team bus pulled up to the Los Angeles Clippers' training center in Playa Vista, Calif. Before the players disembarked for practice, Miller stood at the front and addressed them. "We just got some news from the NCAA," junior point guard Parker Jackson-Cartwright recalls Miller saying. "Zo is coming back."

The whole bus celebrated—except Trier. "We were all hugging Zo, telling him we loved him, and he teared up," Jackson-Cartwright says. "He carries himself like a professional at the highest level, so that was the first time I'd seen him show that kind of emotion."

From there the Cats tried to get back to normal. They went to practice, and the next day upset the Bruins 96–85. Trier came off the bench to score 12 points, grab seven rebounds and dish out four assists, and he rejoined the starting lineup on Feb. 8 for a home win over Stanford. The reintegration of Trier wasn't entirely smooth; he needed time to get the feel back on his pull-up jumpers, and by disrupting an effective guard rotation, he briefly hindered the defense. But the Wildcats' record didn't suffer: They've gone 11–1 with Trier as a starter, including an impressive surge to the Pac-12 tournament title in which he averaged an efficient 20.7 points and was named the Most Outstanding Player. After spending much of his hoops career as

TRIER, TRIER AGAIN
It took time for Trier to regain his shooting form after sitting out 19 games, but support from Jackson-Cartwright (near left) helped.

an ahead-of-schedule prospect—he was the subject of a *New York Times Magazine* story as a 13-year-old phenom, and he began playing in Nike's prestigious, high school AAU circuit, the EYBL, as an eighth-grader—Trier proved he could play catch-up.

In second-seeded Arizona's first two tournament games in Salt Lake City, Trier scored 18 points in a 100–82 defeat of No. 15 seed North Dakota and 14 in the win over Saint Mary's. Since his return on Jan. 21 he has been the Wildcats' highest possession-user (at 24.3%, according to kenpom.com) and second-most efficient starter (with an offensive rating of 121.8, second only to Markkanen's 130.2). With a potential showdown against Gonzaga's No. 1–ranked D looming in the Elite Eight, Trier's isolation offense could prevent Miller & Co. from being bounced from their third regional final in four years. Although he was kept off the court for what felt like forever, there's still a way for Trier to have suited up for the majority of the Wildcats' season: by getting them to a 39th game—which would take place just up the road from campus, in Glendale, Ariz., at the Final Four. □

MADDIE MEYER/GETTY IMAGES (ADRIAN)

LOCAL HERO

SHRUGGING OFF PAIN AND HECKLERS, MORGANTOWN PRODUCT **NATHAN ADRIAN** IS NOW THE HEART OF PRESS VIRGINIA

THEY USED to sit in section 45 in the corner of WVU Coliseum, their three kids clad in blue and yellow, the middle one filled with visions of becoming the next Kevin Pittsnogle or Da'Sean Butler. Now Kevin and Lisa Adrian stood in section 118 of the KeyBank Center in Buffalo, applauding that same boy on this unfamiliar floor, his arms lifted in a triumphant V. For the usually stoic forward Nathan Adrian, his gesture acknowledged not only West Virginia's place in the Sweet 16 after the 83–71 win over Notre Dame but also the pain he'd endured to arrive at that moment. "For him to raise his arms and clap and thank the fans," said Kevin, "he knows there's something special going on."

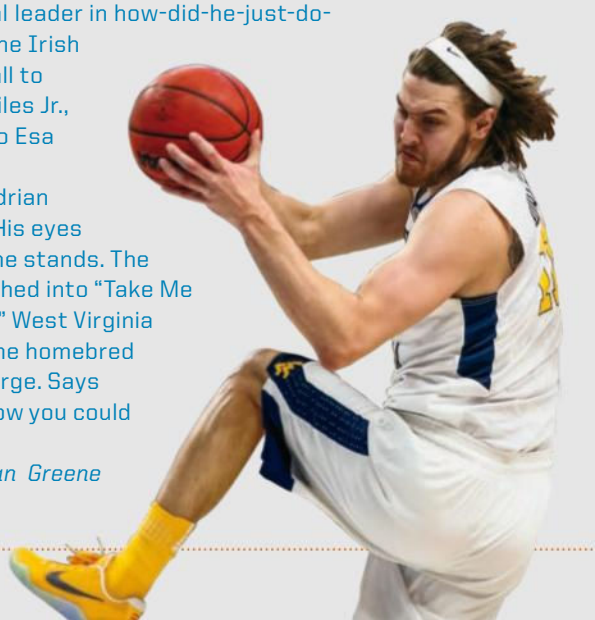
The Mountaineers are a starless swarm of a team best known for Press Virginia, the country's No. 1 defense in turnover percentage. It is the 6' 9" Adrian who spearheads that D, harassing and trapping ballhandlers in the backcourt and often switching on to guards at the other end.

Two years ago Adrian seemed an unlikely candidate for fan appreciation. Any goodwill generated by being the Mountaineers' first Morgantown High grad on scholarship since 1956 had long dried up by his sophomore season, when he shot just 30.7% from the field in 15.4 minutes per game. His right wrist hurt so badly that he could hardly bend his shooting hand back, but he told no one. He smiled through both the pain that caused his poor play and the pain that his poor play caused. Social media critics pilloried him. Friends passed along the invective they'd overheard around town. "He would just brush it off like, 'Eh, oh well,' " says senior guard James Long.

That summer Adrian underwent surgery to remove what turned out to be a cyst in his wrist, and he became a starter the following January. Now Adrian ranks third on West Virginia in points (9.9) and assists (2.9) and first in rebounds (6.0). He is also its unofficial leader in how-did-he-just-do-that? plays. Against the Irish he scooped a loose ball to junior guard Daxter Miles Jr., who hot-potatoed it to Esa Ahmad for a slam.

A short time later Adrian walked off the court. His eyes found his parents in the stands. The school pep band launched into "Take Me Home, Country Roads." West Virginia was moving on, with the homebred Adrian leading the charge. Says Kevin, "I don't know how you could script it any better."

—Dan Greene



SKY'S THE LIMIT
With two MVPs and the best-ever five-year start to a career, Trout stands alone—and should only get better as he enters his age-25 season

MLB·PREVIEW·2017

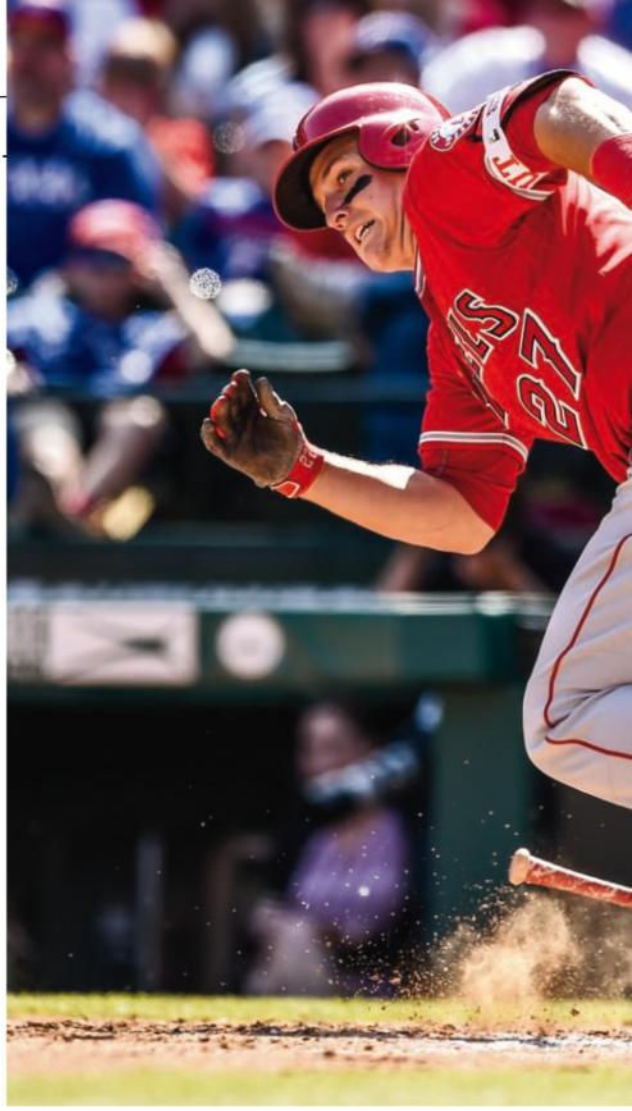
★ THE GREATEST EVER ★

THE NEW TESTAMENT

O.K., IT HAPPENED. BASEBALL FINALLY REACHED THE CRESCENDO IT HAD BEEN BUILDING TOWARD FOR 108 YEARS—SO NOW WHAT? IT'S YEAR ONE A.C. (AFTER CUBS), AND TIME TO RESET THE STORY LINES, STARS AND STYLES THAT WILL KICK OFF THE GAME'S NEW ERA. HERE ARE 17 REASONS BASEBALL WILL STAY GREAT IN 2017 (AND BEYOND). NO, THE CUBS AREN'T GOING AWAY—CAN SOMEONE PLEASE FIND A FLAW IN KRIS BRYANT?—BUT THE PLACE TO START IS THE LIVING, BREATHING BLEND OF MANTLE AND MAYS IN OUR MIDST. THOSE WHO KNOW MIKE TROUT BEST CAN TAKE IT FROM HERE. . . .

BY BEN REITER

Photograph by **Robert Beck**



Half a decade into the Mike Trout era, this much is clear: He can do most anything he puts his mind to. At 25, the Angels' centerfielder has won two American League MVP awards, in 2014 and '16, and could easily own five. (He has three second-place finishes.) Last fall FanGraphs writer August Fagerstrom determined that Trout just completed the ninth-best five-year stretch, by Wins Above Replacement (WAR), of any position player in history. Of course, the eight above him were credited for their peak years, while Trout theoretically has yet to reach his physical prime.

One thing in which Trout is not interested is discussing his own burgeoning legacy. He's notoriously laconic on the subject. Luckily, those who know him are not. Cooperstown is still perhaps 20 years away, but why wait to appreciate his greatness? SI asked coaches, teammates and other insiders for their perspectives on a legend whose best days are not locked in history but are still in front of him—and of us.

THE MILLVILLE METEOR

ROY HALLENBECK, MILLVILLE (N.J.) SENIOR HIGH BASEBALL COACH He was a Little League legend, but when he got to us, he was small. The only tool that jumped out was speed. His first year, we had an opening in the infield and decided to give him a look. His heart was going so fast. We run simple four-corner fungo drills, and he's throwing the ball against the backstop. I said to the coaches, 'This kid may not be emotionally ready for this.' We were going to send him to the freshman group in a day or two if he didn't turn it around. Yeah, Mike Trout was two days from not making the team his freshman year.

GREG MORHARDT, ANGELS SCOUT, '07-14 In high school Mike pulled most balls, because he could. You don't have to use the opposite field in high school if you're physically dominating and guys aren't throwing hard. Once during a showcase I said, 'Hey, Mike, could you hit one down to the rightfield corner?' First one, didn't hit it great. Second one, stroked it right down the line on a rope, 10 feet fair. 'O.K., that's good. Just go back to where you were.' You wanted to know Mike could do it—but you don't want anybody else to know.

KENNY WILLIAMS, MILLVILLE ASSISTANT COACH Mike had verbally committed to East Carolina the summer before his senior year. One night Billy Godwin, the coach there, was here when we were playing our local rival. There are 30 scouts in the stands. Mike hits a moonshot, and everyone thinks it's going out. The centerfielder runs back, then realizes it's going to drop in front of him. Mike's flying. He was 3.8, 3.9 seconds home to first from the right side, which is ridiculous. He crosses the plate standing up before the ball gets back to the infield. Thirty scouts' stopwatches drop. Thirty cellphones pop up. Godwin comes walking along the backstop, kicking the ground, and says, 'He's the best bleeping high school player I've ever seen. There's no way he's coming to East Carolina.'

KID DYNAMITE
Trout terrorizes opposing teams with his speed and endears himself to fans with his unpretentious personality.

BECOMING AN ANGEL

MORHARDT We had two straight first-round picks that year, and at 24 we take a righthanded high school outfielder: Randal Grichuk, out of Texas. I'm stunned. I text someone in our draft room: 'What's going on? Mayday, mayday!' Four minutes go by. I get a text: *We're taking Trout at 25.*

JOHN WILLIAMSON/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (ACTION); JOSH BARBER/ANGELS BASEBALL LP/GETTY IMAGES

"OTHER CLUBS SAY THEY WERE ON HIM," SAYS SERVAIS, "BUT THEY ALWAYS SAY THAT AFTER THE FACT."

SCOTT SERVAIS, RANGERS DIRECTOR OF PLAYER DEVELOPMENT, 2006-11 I remember in our draft room the question was, 'Why would the Angels take two high school outfielders back-to-back?' Other clubs will say they were on him, but they always say that after the fact.

BRIAN CASHMAN, YANKEES GENERAL MANAGER This is real: He was No. 2 on our draft board. Stephen Strasburg was No. 1. We were picking toward the back, No. 29, but we didn't think anybody was on him. He came off the board before us, and that's that.

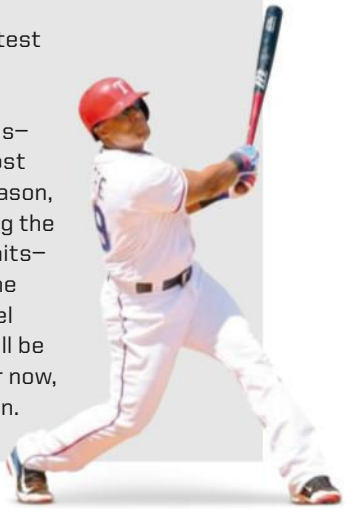
JEFF MATHIS, DIAMONDBACKS CATCHER; ANGELS CATCHER, 2005-11 I was at Angel Stadium right after they drafted him. They brought him in to see the stadium and take BP. He didn't have a bat, so I gave him mine. He steps into the cage, and he starts hitting these deep bombs to right center, one after the other. My bat never sounded like that. He was 17 years old.

THE 3,000TH HIT 2

GOOD FIELD, GOOD HIT, GOOD COMPANY

ONE OF THE ERA'S BEST TWO-WAY PLAYERS IS ABOUT TO JOIN A SELECT CLUB

● ADRIÁN BELTRÉ is one of the greatest defensive third basemen of all time—second only to Brooks Robinson in defensive runs saved and fielding runs—but he's also a force on offense. Almost 38 and coming off another strong season, Beltré is just 58 hits away from joining the only 30 other players to have 3,000 hits—all of whom (except Pete Rose, and the PED-tainted Alex Rodriguez and Rafael Palmeiro) are in the Hall of Fame or will be soon. Beltré will get there too, but for now, there's still time to catch him in action.



AN EARTH-SHAKING DEBUT

DINO EBEL, ANGELS BENCH COACH His rookie year [in 2012], we're sitting on the plane together. I said, 'You know that guy Jeter over there with the Yankees? That's you.'

JON DANIELS, RANGERS PRESIDENT OF BASEBALL OPERATIONS The thing that always stood out is he has a body just entirely made for baseball. He's built like nobody else. There were questions about his arm and his defense early on, and as great as he was on Day One, he's made himself a better player.

ALBERT PUJOLS, ANGELS FIRST BASEMAN The thing that impresses me most, for a big guy like he is, is how well he runs. When he goes around the bases, it's like a freaking linebacker running.

EBEL I coached third [when Trout broke in], and when he was coming around, it was like a train. I made sure I got out of his way. I'm 165 pounds; he's gonna knock my block off. His steps make a different sound. Just heavy, hard, like something powerful's coming at you.

RICK SMITH, ANGELS TRAINER He probably goes anywhere from 235 to 240 pounds. His speed, quickness, explosiveness—from zero to 60—are just amazing to me. And his spatial awareness: when to get to the fence, when to time the jump to catch a ball that's three feet over the fence. Where does it come from? It comes from God.

NEW SUPERPOWERS

JEFF FLETCHER, ANGELS BEAT WRITER Early in 2014 he was striking out a lot. Once in Toronto, in May, he struck out four times. I was in the clubhouse, waiting to tactfully ask him why he stunk so much, basically. Which is

RICK YEATTS/GETTY IMAGES (BELTRE)

not the sort of thing he's used to hearing. He just looked at me and was like, 'C'mon, Fletch, I know you want to ask me about strikeouts. Just get over here. Let's do it.' He won MVP that year, by the way.

EBEL In [June] 2014 he hit a game-tying grand slam off Chris Sale in the eighth. I asked him, 'What were you thinking when you walked up to the plate?' He said, 'I hit the home run on deck.' In the on-deck circle he was visualizing what he was going to do. Then he did it.

C.J. CRON, ANGELS FIRST BASEMAN The play that sticks out is when he robbed the Mariners' Jesus Montero, at home in September 2015 *[right]*. I've seen people rob homers before, but the way he climbed the wall, hung up there and just snagged it, it was something I've never seen before.

KOLE CALHOUN, ANGELS RIGHTFIELDER Half his body was literally over the fence. He made it look easy. I said to him, 'Greatest catch I've ever seen.' He just kinda shook it off and kept playing.

GARRETT RICHARDS, ANGELS STARTING PITCHER It's crazy: He's pretty decent at everything he does. He figures things out really quick. Video games. Cribbage. When Torii Hunter was here, we played a lot of dominoes, and he got good. He'll shoot in the mid-70s in golf, no problem, and we'll really only play during spring training, and sometimes on off days during the season.

GARY DISARCINA, ANGELS COACH, 2013-16 Once [Angels coach] Paul Sorrento and I were beating him and [Angels pitcher] Jered Weaver on the last hole, and Mike was about 180 yards off the fairway in the woods. Paul had shot 15 feet from the pin. We're whooping it up. Trout hit a five-iron off the tree trunks, landed 25–30 feet from the pole. Me and Paul were dancing. Paul misses his putt. Mikey drained a 25-footer to win. Ran around celebrating like a little kid.

CALHOUN One time I had a teammate, C.J. Wilson, take a picture of Trout parking. His parking job was crooked—didn't care, tried to get to the clubhouse quick. C.J. goes, 'Here's the only thing that Trout's not the best at.'

MIKE BUTCHER, ANGELS PITCHING COACH, 2007-15 Mike loves video games, and he used to play my son in an online game called *Clash of Clans*. Mike was winning, and my son asked him why he had so many weapons and tools. Mike said, 'You've got to spend some money if you want to play with the big boys. Use your dad's account.' The next day I get a receipt that shows $1,500 in charges. Fifteen hundred dollars! I thought somebody hacked my account. I go to my son, 'What is this all about?' And he says, 'Mike Trout said I needed these.' I see Mike later that day, and he's just laughing. He's really this great big kid who's always having fun. He hasn't changed a bit.

CALHOUN Besides his unbelievable ability, he's the luckiest human I've ever met. We have this charity raffle that all the MLB guys participate in for a scholarship foundation. A few years ago the grand prize was a Rolex. It's probably thousands of tickets sold leaguewide. Guess whose ticket wins? A Rolex. He's lucky, man.

THE LEGEND CONTINUES

KRIS BRYANT, CUBS THIRD BASEMAN, 2016 NL MVP If you had no clue about baseball and were just talking to him, you'd be like, This guy is a cool guy. Just a normal human being who happens to be able to do amazing things on the field.

TIM MEAD, ANGELS V.P. OF COMMUNICATIONS There was a

THE 600TH HOMER 3

POWER COUPLE

THE ANGELS' OTHER FUTURE HALL OF FAMER IS ON THE VERGE OF HISTORY

● THE BIG CONTRACT (10 years, $240 million) set expectations for Albert Pujols *(left)* impossibly high, obscuring the fact that he is still a very productive hitter. After clubbing 40 home runs in 2015 and 31 last year, he's sitting at 591—and will almost certainly become just the ninth member of the 600 home run club this season. He's likely to then pass Sammy Sosa (609) and Jim Thome (612) to reach seventh on the all-time list, with Ken Griffey Jr. (630) in his sights. If Pujols's balky right foot cooperates, Willie Mays (660) and Alex Rodriguez (696) may fall too.

JOHN CORDES/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (PUJOLS); STEPHEN DUNN/GETTY IMAGES

family in New Jersey that had a fire in their house at Christmastime in 2015. Lost their tree, presents, everything. Mike heard about it. On his own he picked up gifts for them—they were strangers—and dropped by the house. He low-keyed all of it. If the family had not said anything to anybody about it, it would have gone unnoticed. That's Mike.

RICHARDS This is going to be our eighth year living together during the season, going back to A ball. Being able to watch him this whole time, I feel like he doesn't get enough credit, because he's on the West Coast. They don't see what he does on a nightly basis.

CRON He signs autographs for kids every day, probably hundreds of them. Always. Before the game, after the game, wherever the kids are gathered. You just don't see superstars doing that.

RICHARDS He doesn't like the spotlight off the field. He likes to sit in a deer stand. He likes to hang out with friends. I got married this off-season, and he's engaged. The four of us all live together. The girls are best friends. Mike's impatient when it comes to cooking. He wants stuff to be done fast. Barbecuing, he turns everything up to high heat and watches it until it's done. You can't do that.

DANIELS He's the best in the game—that any of us have ever seen, really. I look forward to when he's a free agent and signs with an East Coast team.

JIM LEYLAND, MLB MANAGER, 1986-2013 I'm not a guy who likes to compare one player to another. I'm not going to compare Mike to anybody else. But I will say this: People will try to compare other players to Mike Trout for a long time.

Special reporting by Stephanie Apstein, Albert Chen, Jack Dickey, and Tom Verducci.

TROUT'S POND

● NO PLAYER in history has been quite as dominant in his first five full seasons as the Millville Meteor. He's been an annual fixture in the MVP conversation since his second call-up in April 2012. His WAR over the past five years is reminiscent of Joe DiMaggio's over his seven best seasons. Trout's numbers for the last half decade are similar to what the all-time great outfielders put up in their primes—but Trout is still only 25. Here's how his record stacks up. *—Kenny Ducey*

First five full seasons (100+ games)

	TOTAL WAR*	TOTAL HRS	TOP 5 MVP	MVP AWARDS	OPS
Mike Trout	47.8	163	5	2	0.975
Mickey Mantle	39.5	160	3	1	0.995
Willie Mays	39.4	183	3	1	0.985
Barry Bonds	33.2	117	1	1	0.837
Ken Griffey Jr.	30.1	132	1	0	0.895
Hank Aaron	29.9	140	3	1	0.908

*Wins Above Replacement, as measured by Baseball Reference

★ DROUGHT BUSTERS 2.0 ★

A QUEST CALLED TRIBE

AFTER FALLING ONE WIN SHORT, THE INDIANS ADDED ONE BIG BAT. NOW THEY LIKE THEIR CHANCES—A LOT

BY JACK DICKEY

GAME 7 of last year's World Series extinguished baseball's longest active championship drought and—cruelly, given the Indians' 3–1 series lead and all—added another year to its successor's. Cleveland now stands at 68 straight titleless seasons, the fifth-longest stretch since the World Series began in 1903.

What were those first few days like after Game 7? "I stayed up late some nights replaying what happened," says reliever Andrew Miller. "You can't avoid seeing the Cubs' championship gear everywhere. It makes you a little sick." Says star shortstop Francisco Lindor, "I wasn't sleeping very well. I didn't watch TV for like a week and a half." Manager Terry Francona: "I had my hip replaced a few days after, so there were probably four or five days where I was on the pain meds and thought we won. I was waiting for the parade."

Yet as wrenching as that series was, as much as it churned through the Indians' pitching staff, as close as Cleveland had come to the champagne bath without tasting it—the team has by all appearances emerged from its defeat eager, upbeat and stronger.

Much of that flows from the manager. In 2013, when his team lost the wild-card game after closing the regular season with 10 straight wins, Francona was devastated. He couldn't believe how quickly it had ended. But in '16? "I didn't have huge disappointment," he says. "I think pride won out for me." He told his team as much after the final out.

Francona couldn't help but be proud of all the Indians had overcome in winning the pennant. Outfielder Michael Brantley, one of the team's best hitters, went down in May; catcher Yan Gomes in July. More important, Danny Salazar and Carlos Carrasco, two of the team's three best starters, were lost to injury in September, too late for the organization to find veteran replacements. As the team moved

through the playoffs, Francona was essentially working with a three-man rotation. He tasked his bullpen with ever-increasing responsibilities, and it thrived: Over 64⅔ innings, Cleveland relievers allowed just 18 runs and a .212 batting average against.

For Miller, who threw 19⅓ of those innings, it was easier than pitching in the dog days of August. "The adrenaline in those games, it was a blast," he says. "I wanted to pitch in every single one, and, fortunately, it pretty much worked out that way." The lefty does not think he'll have a similar workload this regular season: "I get a paycheck twice a month from the Indians, and it's pretty darn good—they could ask me to work in the I.T. department, and I would. But I don't think that type of bullpen usage is realistic over a long season."

Cleveland went into the off-season with first baseman Mike Napoli and outfielder-would-be-folk-hero Rajai Davis on expiring contracts. With Gomes, Brantley, Carrasco and Salazar returning—and given the 2016 breakouts of outfielder Tyler Naquin and infielder José Ramírez—the team would have been excused for standing pat in free agency.

Instead general manager Mike Chernoff signed designated hitter Edwin Encarnación, the former Blue Jay who has hit the second-most home runs (193) since 2012. "We don't usually play on top-of-the-market guys," says Chernoff. "But with Edwin, we saw there was a possibility of a match if we stepped up. He felt it was right." His three-year, $60 million contract is the largest the Indians have ever given out.

UP SIDE
Lindor, who batted .310 during the postseason, aims to end MLB's longest titleless streak.

Even if his play declines a little at age 34, Encarnación's acquisition gives Francona a lineup without a hole, which is one way to support what might be the league's best starting rotation. Miller and closer Cody Allen anchor a top-five bullpen. Lindor, who only turned 23 in November, looks like a perennial MVP candidate.

"We were saying, 'This is awesome. This is unbelievable,' " Allen says of the Encarnación signing. "I know it sounds weird to say that the off-season after you lost Game 7 of the World Series was a really exciting off-season, but it was."

That's more or less the theme this spring in Cleveland. Most everyone on this largely homegrown club lived through 2015, when the Indians were a fashionable preseason World Series pick *(ahem)* and missed the playoffs. They're wary of repeating it. But they're quietly confident and deservedly peppy.

"Every part of my body is telling me I want to go back," Lindor says. "I'm ready to go battle." □

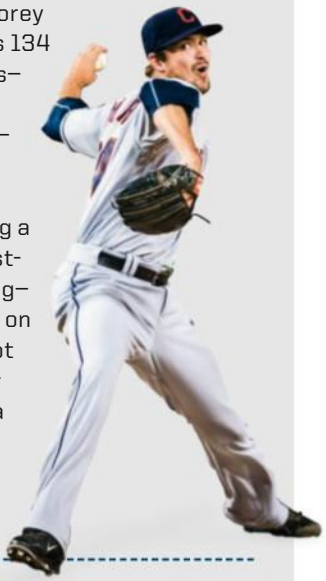
BILLIE WEISS/BOSTON RED SOX/GETTY IMAGES (LINDOR); ROB TRINGALI/SPORTSCHROME/GETTY IMAGES (MILLER); MIKE STOBE/GETTY IMAGES (BRACH); ELIOT J. SCHECHTER/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (DEVENSKI, PHELPS)

★ THE NEW SUPER RELIEVERS ★

FIREMEN IN THE HOLE

THESE HIGH-IMPACT BULLPEN ARMS ARE READY TO TAKE ON BIGGER, MORE FLEXIBLE ROLES BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN

● THE 2016 MLB postseason started with bullpen usage of the past and finished with bullpen usage of the future. Orioles manager Buck Showalter allowed all-world closer Zach Britton to languish on the bench as the AL wild card game slipped away; less than 48 hours later Indians manager Terry Francona called upon reliever Andrew Miller *(right)* in the fifth inning of Game 1 of the ALDS. Francona's strategy only got more creative. In the end Miller, closer Cody Allen and ace Corey Kluber pitched 67⅔ of Cleveland's 134 postseason innings. Their success—Miller had a 1.40 ERA and struck out 30 of the 73 batters he faced—will likely encourage more bullpen innovation . . . to a point.



The new fireman method—having a top reliever come in for the highest-leverage outs, no matter the inning—depends as much on personnel as on a manager's open-mindedness. Not all pitchers can deviate from their routines or maintain their stamina over multiple innings. But some seem well-suited to more flexible, flame-retarding roles.

BRAD BRACH ORIOLES
Over the past two seasons Brach has thrown 158⅓ innings. As long as he can bear the workload, he's likely to be used even more.

CHRIS DEVENSKI ASTROS
Devenski had a 1.83 ERA in 39⅓ innings down the stretch. He's a rotation option, but don't be surprised if he ends up anchoring the bullpen.

DAVID PHELPS MARLINS
He got more than three outs in only six of 59 relief outings last year, but an 11.0 K/9 in high-leverage spots suggests he can handle more.

★ THE BRONX RENAISSANCE ★

THE LONG GAME

GARY SÁNCHEZ'S HOMER BINGE WAS A BLAST—AND A SIGN THAT THE YANKEES ARE BACK TO BUILDING THE RIGHT WAY

BY BEN REITER

NOBODY COULD believe what Gary Sánchez was doing late last summer, least of all Gary Sánchez. After every one of the 20 home runs he launched in a span of just 48 August and September games, the 23-year-old rookie catcher returned to the Yankees' bench for a few deep, incredulous breaths. *Is it really me who's doing this?* he would ask himself. *My god, is it really me?*

It was. Although he had participated in just one big league game over the season's first four months, Sánchez's historic, mesmerizing streak—he reached 19 homers faster than any rookie in baseball history—propelled him to a second-place finish in the AL Rookie of the Year voting. It also spurred rivals around baseball to ask themselves: My god, are these really the Yankees?

By the time Sánchez arrived they looked little like their usual collection of high-priced mercenaries. As early as June, with New York floating around .500, Brian Cashman had begun suggesting to the club's rebuilding-averse ownership that he might want to assume a role he had never taken on in his first 18 years as general manager: trade-deadline seller. By Aug. 12, with owner Hal Steinbrenner's approval, Cashman had not only dealt outfielder Carlos Beltrán and relief aces Aroldis Chapman and Andrew Miller for prospects, but he had also given Alex Rodriguez a respectful, if involuntary, early retirement. Two days later, with playing time now available, Sánchez slugged his second homer of the season, the start of a streak announcing that the Yankees' future had arrived. By September, the Yankees' youth contingent also included outfielder Aaron Judge, first baseman Tyler Austin and pitchers Luis Cessa and Chad Green.

To Cashman, the future looked a lot like the past. Few teams—and few institutions—fetishize their history quite like the Yankees. But for years a pastiche of pinstripes, monuments and scalloped arches has

BACK(STOP) TO THE FUTURE
The Yankees' uncharacteristic decision to sell at last summer's deadline opened the door for prospects like Sánchez.

TOMASSO DEROSA/AP (SANCHEZ); BILLIE WEISS/BOSTON RED SOX/GETTY IMAGES (BETTS)

THE FUN BUNCH 7

AFTER BIG PAPI, THE LITTLE THINGS

FOR THE RED SOX, WINNING—AND JOY—ARE IN THE DETAILS BY TOM VERDUCCI

● NEARLY EVERY spring training morning, coach Brian Butterfield instills the little virtues of team play in the Red Sox by reviewing the previous game with a humorous touch. These sessions are designed to establish the culture of having the right culture—which is why they are known in camp as "Culture Culture."

Players are acknowledged with a raised right fist for smart plays and hustle plays. (You might also see the salute during a game, for instance, after a batter moves a runner to third with no outs.) Dumb mistakes, or just silly ones, merit a raised left fist (as Mookie Betts, *right*, demonstrates) and a word unprintable here. It's a combination of the Instructional League, kangaroo court and a night at the Improv. "We want everybody to know how we won the game," says Dustin Pedroia. "It's not because of Hanley [Ramírez's] three-run home run. It was because Christian Vázquez slid in and had a good secondary [lead] and got on the second baseman to cause the throw to be up the line for the inning to continue. That's how we won."

masked the club's disconnection from its greatest legacy: winning. While the Yankees haven't finished below .500 since 1992—the year Cashman, at 25, became assistant GM—they haven't had a playoff victory since '12, despite continuing to spend more than any other club except, recently, the Dodgers. "Most teams don't back a truck up and buy a world championship," Cashman says.

It appeared to many as if he had done just that in 2009, after a winter in which New York dropped $423.5 million on free agents A.J. Burnett, CC Sabathia and Mark Teixeira was followed by a 27th title. But the heart of the team was still largely the same as it had been for 1996's number 23, and for numbers 24, 25 and 26, which came during Cashman's first three years as GM, starting in '98: Derek Jeter, Andy Pettitte, Jorge Posada and Mariano Rivera, players who came up through the Yankees' system.

Cashman's 2016 deadline dealings brought back three prospects who appear on Baseball America's new top 100 list: shortstop Gleyber Torres (No. 5), outfielder Clint Frazier (No. 39) and pitcher Justus Sheffield (No. 91). In reality, though, Cashman had been preparing to change direction for a while. That new trio joined four other top 100 prospects (outfielders Judge and Blake Rutherford, shortstop Jorge Mateo and righthanded pitcher James Kaprielian) to give the Yankees the consen-

★ IF YOU REBUILD IT . . . ★

BRAVE NEW WORLD

ATLANTA IS REBOOTING ITS FARM SYSTEM—WITHOUT PUNTING ON THE PRESENT BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN

● THE BRAVES are trying to do something unusual for a team in the middle of reconstruction. They're trying not to tank. "For us to go through any sort of a rebuild was beyond painful," says GM John Coppolella, citing the franchise's 14 straight division titles from 1991 to 2005. "It kills the spirit of your players. They get used to the culture of losing."

Atlanta made the playoffs in 2013, but after the highest payroll in franchise history yielded just 79 wins in '14, the front office decided to reboot. That meant the veterans spent two years looking around a clubhouse full of kids and journeymen as the losses mounted. But the moves made by the Braves' front office have laid the groundwork for what it hopes is another run of greatness in Atlanta. Most notably, Atlanta traded outfielder Jason Heyward to the Cardinals in '14 for righthander Shelby Miller, whom they flipped last off-season to the Diamondbacks for centerfielder Ender Inciarte, pitcher Aaron Blair and shortstop Dansby Swanson, the top pick in the '15 draft. That helped lift the Braves' minor league system from No. 29 to No. 1 in Baseball America's '17 rankings. "I'm very thankful [the other teams] said yes," says first baseman Freddie Freeman. "It's a lot more exciting to come to camp."

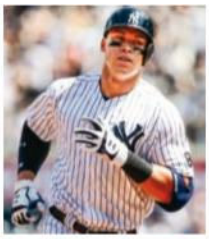
Unlike the Cubs and the Astros—who constructed their rosters to assure failure and gain higher draft picks—the Braves hope to win with old stars on short-term deals. Matt Kemp was acquired last season, the first sign that the team wasn't out to be a loss leader, and second baseman Brandon Phillips arrived from the Reds last month. Quadragenarians R.A. Dickey *(far left)* and Bartolo Colón *(left)* were signed to one-year contracts.

This season the Braves move into SunTrust Park, and they hope the anticipated bump in ticket sales will help them take advantage of the loaded 2019 free-agent class. Until then, they'll rely on the veterans to show the kids what it's like to be on a winner, and that a team can rebuild and win at the same time.

sus No. 2 farm system in baseball, after the Braves.

The result is that no team other than the Cubs seems better positioned to (eventually, anyway) string together a run of dominance like the Yankees' of 20 years ago, nor to more effectively take advantage of what promises to be history's greatest free-agent class two years from now, one that might include Bryce Harper, Clayton Kershaw, Manny Machado and Josh Donaldson.

One position at which they appear set for the long term is catcher. Sánchez seemed an overnight sensation late last summer, but he wasn't at all. Back in February 2009, Cashman flew down to the team's facility in Boca Chica, D.R., to watch a workout by the 15-year-old his scouts kept raving about. Though Sánchez wasn't far removed from the days when he and his brother had been in the streets hitting dolls' heads with broomsticks, Cashman agreed with his scouts: "I told my guys, 'Listen, we have to do whatever it takes to get this guy to say yes to the Yanks.' " It took $3 million.



UP NEXT
Judge (top) and Greg Bird are early arrivals from a prospect crop that has New York's farm system ranked No. 2 in the majors.

The next five years brought challenges that would overwhelm most teenagers, even rich ones. Sánchez had to learn how to be a professional; how to live in a new country; how to speak a new language (he still uses a translator with the media, though not with his pitchers); how to properly play the sport's most demanding position. For a while it seemed as if he might never rise above Double A Trenton (N.J.), where he spent parts of three consecutive seasons. "Yeah, I got tired of Trenton," he says.

The birth of his daughter, Sarah, in 2014, kicked him into gear. "As a father, you want the best for your kid," he says. This winter was the first, though, in which he found himself stopped by fans wherever he went in New York and the Dominican. "Are you Gary Sánchez?" they asked. He couldn't fib if he wanted to: On his left forearm, stretching nearly from wrist to elbow, is a tattoo that reads SÁNCHEZ in green and blue. "Maybe if I wear long sleeves, I could get away with it," he jokes. Hardly. All they need now is a glimpse of his face—the face of a new Yankees era. □

CURTIS COMPTON/ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION/AP (DICKEY & COLÓN); RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES (JUDGE); JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (BIRD)

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C
CUBS

★ THE NEW FACE OF BASEBALL ★

BORN TO WIN

A RING, AN MVP, HONORS AT EVERY LEVEL. THE PERFECT FAMILY, THE HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEART . . . THOSE *EYES.* IS THE KRIS BRYANT STORY TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE? NO—AND DENTISTRY'S LOSS WAS THE BUDDING CUBS DYNASTY'S GAIN

BY TOM VERDUCCI

Photograph by **Robert Beck**

EVERYTHING YOU are about to read is true, though at times it may sound too good to be so.

It is true that Kris Bryant was the 2013 College Player of the Year, the 2014 Minor League Player of the Year, the 2015 National League Rookie of the Year and, while playing third base for the first world championship Chicago Cubs team in 108 years, the 2016 NL Most Valuable Player.

It is also true that two months after he secured the last out to clinch the Holy Grail of sports championships, Bryant, 25, married his high school sweetheart, a girl he met in freshman English class.

It is true that he earned all A's in elementary, middle and high schools with the exception of one B—the result of an 89 average in high school precalculus. Such smarts earned Bryant the No. 2 academic ranking in his graduating class, which carried the honor of speaking at graduation as the salutatorian. Bryant instead yielded that honor to a classmate with a similar GPA, because he wanted her to have the recognition.

It is true that the 6' 5", blue-eyed Bryant is so handsome that he is the rare baseball player to be an out-of-uniform spokesperson. (Clothing retailer Express hired him as a model.)

True, too, is that Bryant does not smoke, drink or use profanity. The Cubs have been known to toast victories in their postgame "party room" at Wrigley Field with shots of whiskey. A clubhouse attendant fills Bryant's shot glass with apple juice. "Guys," Bryant told his teammates midway through last season, "let's win the World Series. And when we do, I'll have my first sip of alcohol."

Says Bryant's wife, Jess, "Then it became the running joke in the clubhouse: 'We have to win just for Kris!' "

About an hour after Chicago won Game 7 of the World Series, with most of the Cubs wearing only a bit more champagne and beer than they drank, first baseman Anthony Rizzo stood next to a refrigerator in the clubhouse when a thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Kris!" he said. "I've got to find out if he drank tonight."

The charmed baseball life of Kris Bryant seems an invention of nostalgia, ripped from the Chip Hilton novels of Clair Bee in the 1950s and '60s. It seems especially fictitious in this cynical age when incivility, vulgarity and self-promotion usually win the shouting contest for media coverage, and when the best player in baseball, Mike Trout, is dismissed as too "boring" (code for not controversial enough) to be a crossover star.

Unlike Trout, who has yet to win a playoff game, Bryant is a card-carrying world champion, which raises his profile in a sport where teams, not individuals, are the strongest brands. Young, supremely accomplished, the rare accessible slugger, he is baseball's crown prince.

In two seasons he has hit 65 home runs, most of them with eye-catching majesty that satiate our love for the long ball, and all of them produced with the ideal, highly calibrated, state-of-the-art swing that is changing how baseball is played. Bryant has only one equal in baseball history when it comes to hitting 60 homers and winning a World Series in his first two years in the big leagues: Joe DiMaggio (1936–37), the archetype of baseball mythologizing.

"I've never seen him vary from the person he is today," said Matt Lawrence, 48, a lifelong Cubs fan and, a dozen years ago, the coach of a Southern Nevada travel team that included the past two NL MVPs, Bryant and Nationals outfielder Bryce Harper. "He embodies everything you'd want in a son and everything you'd want in a guy your daughter married."

As a child, the younger of two sons of Susie and Mike Bryant wanted to be a dentist. ("I always enjoyed teeth," Kris said. "I don't know why. I brush my teeth a lot.") Now Bryant is a standard-bearer for the sport.

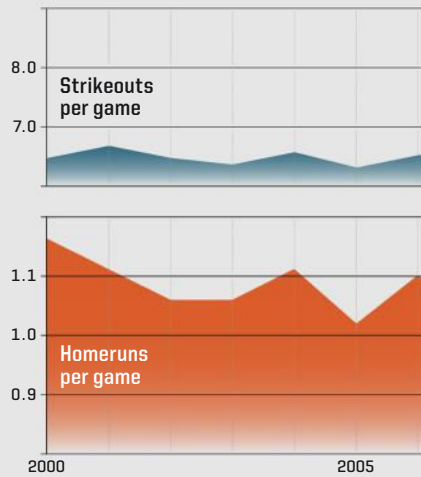
This is more than a true story. It's also the affirmation of ancient truths such as the power of first loves,

POWER SURGE 10

HOME RUNS ARE BACK

WHAT'S BEHIND THE SUDDEN RETURN OF THE LONG BALL?

● LAST SEASON baseballs left the ballpark at a rate not seen since 2000, the peak of the Steroid Era. While strikeouts continued to rise, the home run rate (1.16 per team per game) was the second highest in history, and the explanations range from juiced baseballs to increased velocity by pitchers to state-of-the-art PEDs to climate change. Another theory: Hitters are changing their approach. New analytics (such as launch angles and exit velocities) are confirming what Ted Williams knew early on: The best way to hit is to swing up to squarely meet a ball traveling down, and as a result, a number of players have boosted their careers recently by creating more lift in their swing. This season will go a long way in telling us whether '16 was a blip or if the pendulum is indeed swinging back to the slugger.



CAGE MATCH
Kris's perfect swing was honed over the years by his father, Mike (below), in the threadbare hitting facility at their Vegas home.

the connection between fathers and sons, and the inspirational potential of baseball. There is only one place to begin the story of how Bryant rose to the top of baseball, and the night he celebrated it: in The Cage.

THE BOY KNEW what time it was when sunset fell over Las Vegas: It was time to hit. It started when Kris was five. He'd grab his bat and wait in a doorway of the garage, which led to the outdoor batting cage where Mike Bryant gave hitting lessons to local kids all day in the 100° Vegas heat. The last lesson ended around sunset. His father would peek toward the door and see his boy there, ready for his turn in The Cage.

A batting cage is an inelegant keeper of dreams, a metal-and-mesh repository of hope. This one became so threadbare from use that balls Kris hit sometimes would fly through holes and skitter across the street into neighbors' yards. With enough diligence and the right instruction in the cage, we believe the secrets of the hardest thing to do in sports—hit a baseball—might begin to reveal themselves. And sometimes, what goes into the cage has as much meaning as what comes out. Such was the case for Mike Bryant, who built The Cage so that his sons, Kris and Nick, would not be like him.

"A walking Shakespearean tragedy" is how Mike described his younger, baseball-playing self. Mike Bryant was an outfielder from Acton, Mass., and what scouts refer to as a "toolsy" player. He ran a 6.7 60. He could throw a baseball with one crow hop from the centerfield wall at Fenway Park to home plate on the fly. He hit home runs that measured 500 feet. He was a star at the University of Massachusetts–Lowell, where he set the then Division II school's career home run record. The Red Sox selected him in the ninth round of the 1980 draft. They sent the brash kid to Elmira, in the New York–Penn League, where he was introduced to the slider and promptly hit .194.

"I had all the tools and did not have the mental makeup to succeed at that level, to be able to handle the failure. No way," Mike says.

The next spring Mike reported for spring training in Winter Haven, Fla. One day a coach came up to Mike and two other minor leaguers and said, "Ted wants to work with you guys tomorrow. Be there at 6 a.m."

Ted meant Ted Williams, the greatest hitter who ever lived, an annual guest hitting instructor in Red Sox camp. Mike set his alarm early. He was at the batting cage at 5:50 a.m., proud to be the first of the minor leaguers to arrive. Ted was there waiting.

"Bryant, you're late!" Williams bellowed.

"Sir?"

"If you're not a half hour early, you're f------ late."

"Yes, sir."

Mike was awed by the great Williams, never more so than when Ted talked hitting. Ted drew these word-pictures about angles that challenged everything Mike ever knew. Ted explained that pitchers throw the ball downhill at an angle between six and 10 degrees, and so an upward angle in a hitter's swing was imperative. To do this, Ted would drop his barrel early and behind him so that it met the baseball on an upward angle that matched the downward angle of the pitch.

Mike hit .210 that year for Winter Haven in the Class A Florida State League, but the Williams method started to take root. The next spring training, Mike hit over .400. One day, after a game on one of the back fields in which he had two doubles, a single and a fly out to the fence, he was told he was being released.

At 23 years old Mike was out of baseball. He drove to Tampa, picked up Susie and, still in his tank top and flip flops, drove

DENIS POROY/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN LOCHER/AP (MIKE BRYANT)

straight home to Massachusetts, where 24 inches of snow and unemployment greeted him. He soon moved to Las Vegas to find work at his father-in-law's outdoor furniture company, House of Casual Living, a name that quickly became a cruel ironic joke. Mike worked most days from six in the morning to eight at night. He missed many of Kris and Nick's youth baseball games, until one day, in 2000, when Kris was eight and Nick was 10, he decided he did not want to miss any more. He sold the company, took a job as a chemical sales rep and devoted himself to teaching his boys, and many others, including future Rangers infielder Joey Gallo, about baseball. "I'm going to teach you to hit like Ted Williams," Mike told Kris around then.

The philosophy hinged on two principles: Hit it hard and hit it in the air. "He hung on every word," Mike said.

IN THE SUMMER before his freshman year of high school, Kris was headed to an American Legion tournament with a teammate and his teammate's mother when the mother's daughter called. "Kris is here in the car with us, Jess," the mom said coyly, loud enough for Kris to hear.

"When they came home," Jess says, "she said, 'I don't think he likes you. I tried to get a read, but he didn't say anything.' "

Jess would soon learn that being quiet was the norm for Kris. She and Kris wound up in the same English and geometry classes that fall. "She was the more popular one," he says. "She was class president twice, and senior year she was student body president, so everybody knew her.

"One of my buddies on the team was with one of Jess's friends, so then we started hanging out together, and it went from there."

In their Sam Bowie moment of infamy, the Astros took Stanford pitcher Mark Appel with the first pick of the 2013 draft, leaving Kris Bryant, coming off his junior year at the University of San Diego, for the Cubs. With his $6.7 million signing bonus Bryant bought a gift for his father: a state-of-the-art, 65-foot batting cage (it's actually a well-equipped indoor workout room) with a $3,300 pitching machine. Mike named the new place The Bryant Man Cage. Every winter Mike still throws to him there five days a week. They are surrounded by photos of Kris playing baseball since he was eight. "It's amazing that in all of them, my swing looks the same," Kris says. "The only difference is that in college, I spread out my stance more."

"Kris," says Cubs hitting coach John Mallee, "has the prototype of the modern swing." Bryant's swing is more a marvel of advanced engineering than it is brute force. At 6' 5" and 230 pounds he is not especially muscular. His is the Swiss timepiece of swings: a carefully timed chronograph of angles, gears and levers. The first key for Bryant is to get his barrel to enter the hitting zone early. His back elbow stays connected to his rib cage—not getting far from his body—to create a shorter path to the ball. His back foot rolls slightly, which keeps his back hip from firing too soon. Bryant wants his levers to fire sequentially in perfect timing: front hip, hands, back hip and, lastly, bat head, finished off with tremendous extension through the ball with his long arms.

Every time Bryant swings, he tries to hit the bottom third of the ball, the key to creating the backspin that explains why his fly balls carry more than other hitters'. There are two key angles to his swing: the angle at which his barrel drives up at the baseball—the "attack angle," which typically is 18 degrees for him—and the angle created by the barrel being lower than his hands, or his "vertical bat angle." As a rookie in 2015, Bryant's vertical bat angle was 38 degrees. Bryant struck out a league-high 199 times, or 31% of his plate appearances. Mike figured those contact issues resulted from Kris's bat being too vertical. After that season father and son incorporated a "high-tee drill" in their work. Kris hit fly balls off a tee with the ball placed just above the top of the strike zone on the outer third of the plate, a drill he still uses every day.

PARTY ON
Even in a celebration 108 years in the making, the clean-living Bryant remained true to himself.

CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/TNS/GETTY IMAGES (FIELD CELEBRATION); STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES

"We had to get that to an angle of between 20 and 25 degrees," Mike said. "The barrel still was below his hands, but we got him to get a little less vertical. His attack angle upward stayed the same."

The result: In 2016, Bryant cut his strikeout percentage from 31 to 22 and improved his two-strike batting average from .151 to .209—while boosting his overall slugging percentage from .488 to .554. The pinnacle of his improvement was Game 7 of the World Series, when in five turns at bat Bryant forced Cleveland pitchers to throw him 34 pitches, 18 of them with two strikes. He won three two-strike battles: with a single, a walk and the fly ball that advanced the go-ahead run into scoring position in the 10th inning.

Kris and Mike last winter identified the key area of improvement for this season: opposite-field hitting. Every time Kris hit off the pitching machine, even on pitches middle and in, he emphasized getting the ball airborne to right centerfield, where he hit most of his home runs in the minor leagues. In 2016, Bryant batted .179 with no home runs on balls hit to the opposite field.

Lawrence, his travel-ball coach as a teenager, has a saying about Kris: His first love is baseball—he fell in love with the game before he noticed girls or met Jess. And Bryant honors his first love with an unrequited quest to be better than he was yesterday.

ANTHONY RIZZO found two flaws in Kris Bryant, and now is the time to reveal them.

"Number one, he wears way too much free stuff," Rizzo says. "Number two, we need to get him out more. Seriously, he's a homebody."

"Guilty," Bryant says. "Jess and I put on the TV, watch Netflix, order in food and try to be as normal as we can be. We've always done that, but now more so because in Chicago you're going to get recognized. I love the fans, I love everything about them, but sometimes it's nice to turn that baseball switch off and just try to be a normal person. After a game, I try to stay up an extra three or four hours so I get that extra time to decompress and watch my TV and eat my Cold Stone ice cream."

Says Jess, "We'll be out and people come up to him at the grocery store, and that can be frustrating if you're in a hurry. But he says, 'You know what? I want them to see my personality, that I'm a nice guy. I think that's all good Karma, and it comes back to you. Treat people with kindness, and it all comes back.' "

One day in 2015, as Kris made it to the majors, doctors found a tumor in Lawrence's kidney. It was cancerous. The kidney was removed, and doctors told Lawrence they were reasonably confident that

CLIFF WELCH/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (PHILLIPS); DAVID J. GRIFFIN/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MATTINGLY); JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (MARTIN); NOEL VASQUEZ/GETTY IMAGES (TURTLE)

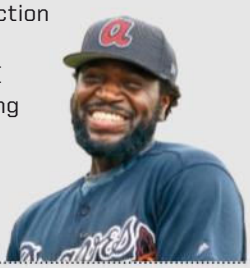
★ THE FAN EXPERIENCE ★

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

PLAYERS TOLD SI ABOUT THEIR MOST MEMORABLE INTERACTIONS WITH FANS BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN

"When I was in rookie ball, someone yelled at me, 'You need a steak sandwich!' "
—Marlins 2B Dee Gordon, who weighed 150 lbs. at the time

"I was on deck and this guy was with his girlfriend, and he was like, 'Brandon, you can't hit! You swing like your mama!' And he goes, 'You can't get around on a fastball! You have a slow bat! You can't get around on nothing!' And I turned around and I said, 'I bet I can get around on your girl!' And everybody in the section was laughing, and he didn't say nothing for the rest of the game. I end up getting a hit, and I'm looking at him, blowing kisses at his girl, and she's laughing. I turned that one around a little bit, I guess."
—Braves 2B Brandon Phillips



"I wear my pants quite high, and I've been called Steve Urkel a lot. I have a high belly button and long legs! People don't realize that!"
—Braves 1B Freddie Freeman

"The one they'd get on me with all the time was, 'Trim those sideburns!' from *The Simpsons* episode. It's everywhere! We went to Australia a few years back, and it was everywhere."
—Marlins manager Don Mattingly

"The funniest one I can remember is a fan calling me Turtle, like from *Entourage*, in San Francisco when I was with the Dodgers. It got in my head! I was on deck. 'Hey, Turtle!' I knew exactly what he was talking about, because it was one of my favorite shows, and then the actor lost a little bit of weight and I was like, Hey, he doesn't look too bad! I'll take it!"
—Blue Jays C Russell Martin

the cancer had not metastasized. "Going through my recovery," Lawrence says, "one of my motivations to get therapy done and be weaned off medication was Kris. It was his first year in the big leagues, and I wanted to see him play every day."

Last year Lawrence, who now lives in Los Angeles, was thrilled to see Kris during All-Star week in San Diego. Before the game, Mike told Kris that American League starting pitcher Chris Sale was going to attack him with a fastball down and in with the first pitch. "Sit on that pitch and hit the piss out of it," Mike said.

Bryant had struck out in all six previous at bats against Sale. The lefthander threw a first-pitch fastball, and Bryant whistled it out of the park. Mike whooped so long and loud in his seat in the lower concourse that someone near him said, "You must be his father."

"Kris had great role models," Lawrence says. "Mike is a great father, and Kris has his mother's disposition. Susie's demeanor is very even-keeled. He truly has some of the best traits of both parents."

Just when his Cubs began their playoff run last year, Lawrence received more bad news. The cancer he thought was gone had returned, this time in a lump in one of his lungs. Doctors scheduled another surgery. They advised him not to attend the National League Championship Series at Dodger Stadium, where the Cubs would be playing Los Angeles. Mike and Kris found out about his condition and invited him to spend time with them at the team's hotel.

"KRIS," SAYS MALLEE, "HAS THE PROTOTYPE OF THE MODERN SWING."

MISTER EVERYTHING
Bryant, who played six different positions, also excels on defense.

A year and a half after the removal of his kidney, Lawrence had part of his lung removed. Again he found inspiration for his recovery from Kris. He was invited to Kris and Jess's wedding on Jan. 7 in Las Vegas. He wouldn't miss it for the world.

On the night of Nov. 2, 2016, Lawrence watched on a television set in his backyard as Kris fielded a ball hit by Michael Martínez of the Indians with two outs in the bottom of the 10th inning of Game 7. Bryant wore number 17, the same number Mike wore and the same number Nick wore, and the same number of minutes in the most famous rain delay in World Series history that night. Despite one last tempting of 108 years' worth of fate—his left spike slipped just as his arm came around—Bryant threw to Rizzo at first base for the final out of a moment Lawrence feared he would never live to see. Lawrence stared at the TV in disbelief.

The next morning he was listening to a World Series report on the car radio. That's when it hit him. It happened. It really did happen. Alone in his car, he welled up in tears. "Baseball was the first love of my life—and the Cubs were that first love," Lawrence says. "So this whole experience would have been amazing anyway. But to have someone like Kris be a part of it . . . well, it's pretty indescribable how it felt."

When the Cubs finally reached the land of milk and honey, they turned it into a raging river of champagne and beer. This was the night Bryant promised he would join them in the bacchanalia. "His parents never really drank," Jess says about his sobriety, "and when I asked him once about it, he said, 'I have no interest.' "

As for the truth of what really happened that night after Game 7, let Bryant explain:

"We win the World Series and . . ." he says, pausing for effect, "I still didn't do it. I didn't keep up my end of the bargain.

"It was such a big moment, but I just felt like I don't need to change who I am. I was the same person that got me to this point, so why do I have to be a different person after that? It just didn't make sense to me."

If The Cage was the best place to begin this true story, the wet clubhouse on the night of Game 7 is the best place to end it. The Cubs' wait took so long that in geochronology terms, it feels like the turning of an epoch in baseball, Pleistocene to Holocene. On this side, the Cubs are not only winners, they are also the hottest commodity in baseball, which means the sirens of celebrity call to them. Even Bryant admits, "I feel like where we're at with this team right now, I have to have my dad's personality a little bit—be a little more outgoing, more talkative. But if I had a choice, I wouldn't say much. That's my mom: Only say something when it needs to be said."

On this side of history, the future of baseball goes through Chicago, and specifically through its crown prince. It sounds as equal a burden as an honor. But ask yourself this: If Mike and Susie's kid didn't change the night the Cubs won the World Series, why is he going to change now?

"I'm not," Bryant said. "I don't care to be any different. I have my corner and my comfort zone that I stick to. It's always been that way and always will." □

ROB FOLDY/GETTY IMAGES

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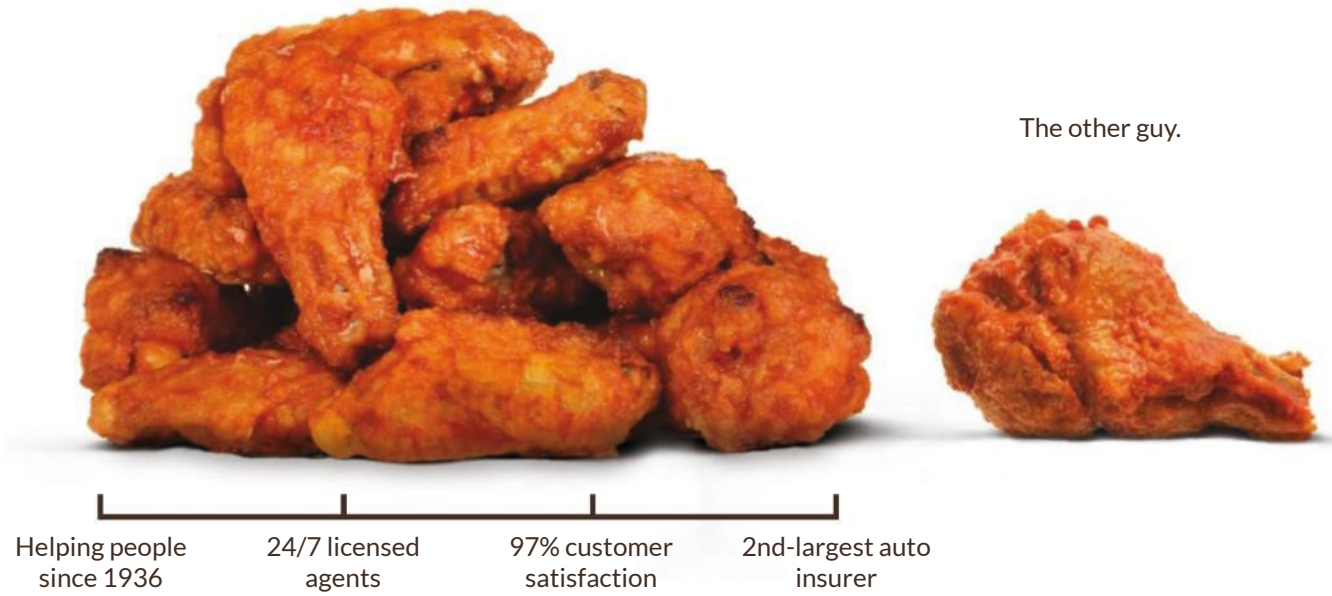

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★ THE GREATEST GENERATION

ETA: RIGHT NOW

BASEBALL'S BEST ENTRY CLASS—*GO!* 1971 (BRETT, RICE AND SCHMIDT)? '85 (BONDS, LARKIN, SMOLTZ)? 2005 (BRAUN, GORDON, TULO, ZIMMERMAN)? THOSE YEARS SAW A TON OF FUTURE STARS DRAFTED OR SIGNED TO THEIR FIRST PRO CONTRACTS. THE NEXT GREAT YEAR IN THE CONVERSATION IS 2015: LESS THAN TWO YEARS AFTER TURNING PRO, SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THAT CLASS HAVE ALREADY MADE THEIR PRESENCE FELT

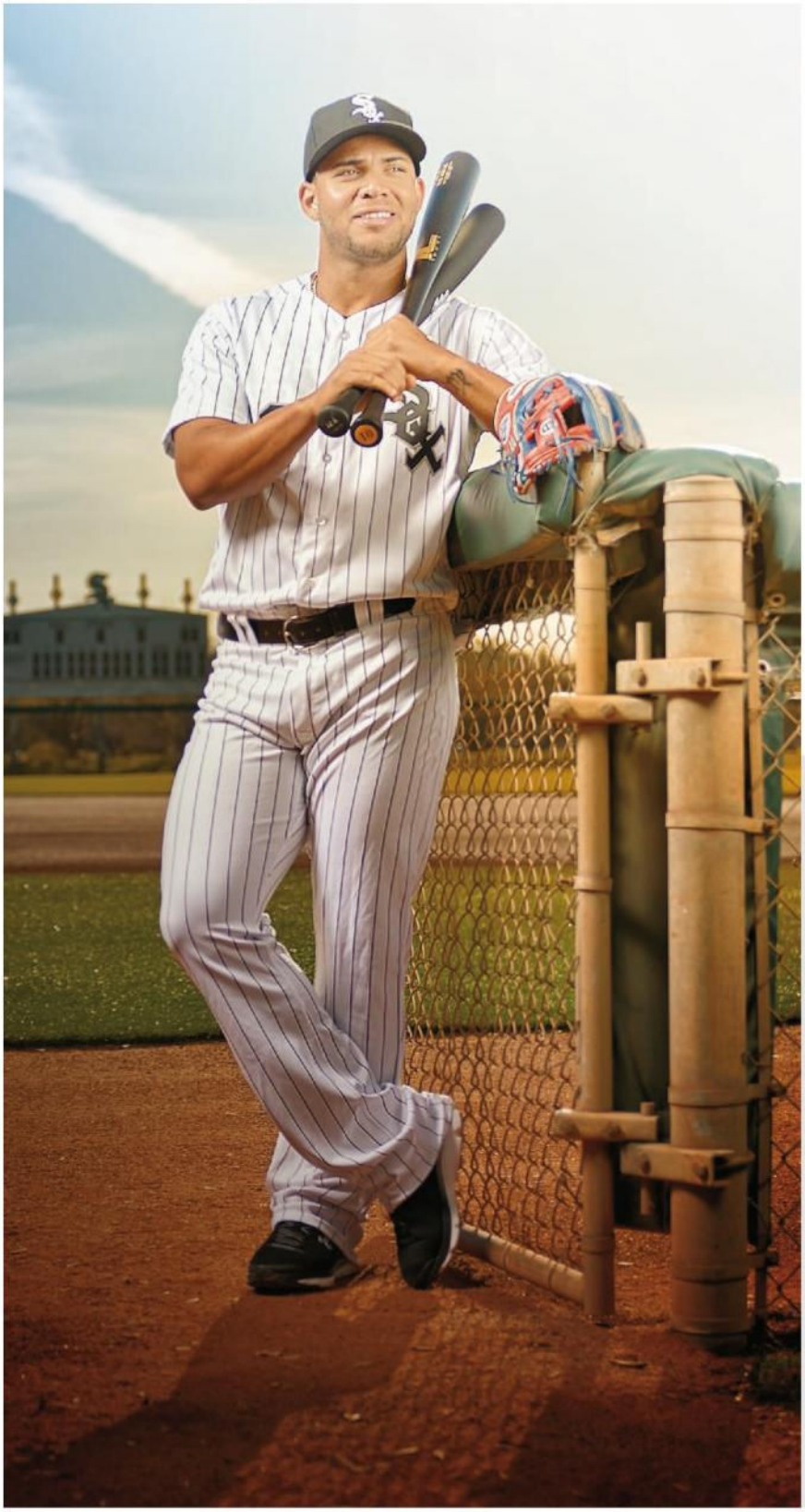
BY JON TAYLER

ANDREW BENINTENDI, 22

BOSTON RED SOX. LF

The No. 1 prospect in the game according to Baseball America and Baseball Prospectus, Benintendi has all the tools: a swing that produced a .312 batting average and a .932 OPS in two minor league seasons; above-average speed on the bases; excellent range and instincts in the field. To all that he adds the kind of hair and good looks that would make a member of a boy band jealous.

Photograph by **Jeffery A. Salter**



DANSBY SWANSON, 22

ATLANTA BRAVES. SS

Swanson was supposed to be the face of the Diamondbacks after they made him the No. 1 pick in the 2015 draft. Instead the D-Backs traded the Vanderbilt product and Kennesaw, Ga., native to the Braves in December 2015, and he is now one of the leading lights of Atlanta's rebuild. Swanson's two-way excellence at a premium position makes him the ideal candidate to help the Braves return to respectability in their first season at SunTrust Park.

Photograph by
Jeffery A. Salter

YOAN MONCADA, 21

CHICAGO WHITE SOX. 2B

Meet the next big thing from Cuba: Signed for a record-setting $31.5 million in 2015 by Boston, Moncada can hit, run, field and throw. That package of skills is what made him the key player going to Chicago in exchange for lefty ace Chris Sale in the off-season's biggest trade and the No. 2 prospect in the game this spring, according to Baseball America. Moncada will likely start the season in Triple A but should be in the majors before the year is over.

Photograph by
Robert Beck

Braves

OFFICIAL BALL
MAJOR LEAGUE

ALEX BREGMAN, 22

HOUSTON ASTROS. 3B

In his first 85 plate appearances after being called up from Triple A last July 25, Bregman hit .169/.235/.234 and looked overmatched against major league pitching. But from Aug. 16 through season's end Bregman, the No. 2 pick in the 2015 draft out of LSU, hit a scalding .323/.364/.629. Now he's the starting third baseman in a lineup loaded with young talent, and a key piece of a team planning to play in October.

Photograph by
Robert Beck

IAN HAPP, 22

CHICAGO CUBS. 2B/OF

As if the Cubs—coming off a World Series title and featuring a roster that looks more like a fantasy team than a real one—didn't have enough going their way, Happ is poised to be the next impact bat coming to Wrigley Field. He's unlikely to work his way into Chicago's lineup this year, but the switch-hitting Happ has versatility at the plate and in the field, which should help him fit perfectly with manager Joe Maddon's preferred style.

Photograph by
Robert Beck

★ THE MASTER CRAFTSMAN ★

THE REDS' BIG MACHINE

HISTORY IS HAPPENING IN CINCY: JOEY VOTTO IS A HALL-LEVEL HITTER—AND GETTING BETTER. DON'T MISS IT

BY JACK DICKEY

A RUDIMENTARY but effective way to assess the quality of a hitter is through evaluation of his slash line. One of the slashiest: Reds first baseman Joey Votto has a career batting average of .313, a career on-base percentage of .425 and a career slugging percentage of .536. Only five players in baseball history have done as well or better in all three categories. Their names are Ruth, Williams, Gehrig, Foxx and Hornsby.

There are measures even more rudimentary. A hitter's most basic goal is to not make outs, and only 11 men in baseball history have been better than the 33-year-old Votto at not making outs, i.e. getting on base. One is Barry Bonds; one played in the 1890s; the other nine are in the Hall of Fame.

Votto reaches the plate knowing exactly what he wants to hit, and he waits for it. Since 2014, according to Fangraphs, no hitter has swung at a lower share of pitches out of the strike zone. He hits the ball all over the field, too, and his career batting average on balls he puts in play (.359) is fifth in modern baseball history, one tick behind Mike Trout's (the others ahead of him are Ty Cobb, Shoeless Joe Jackson and Hornsby). Last year he did not hit a single infield fly ball; only two other qualified regulars could say the same.

Following a slow start in 2016—Votto says "confusion, frustration, and determination" filled his head—he hit .408 after the All-Star break, becoming only the fourth player in the last 30 years to hit above .400 in any half of any season. (What exactly went wrong early on? "There was some stuff," is all Votto will say.) Over the last two seasons, slow start and all, Votto has posted the best OPS in baseball. Though he has not since matched the power of his 2010 MVP season, every other part of his offensive game has gotten better.

There are few hitters whose at bats are so captivating—and few teams whose games are less competitive. The Reds have had the game's worst record over those two years, finishing a combined 71½ games out of first place in the NL Central.

Says Reds manager Bryan Price, "He's someone, for me, that any baseball fan would pay to see hit, would pay to see play. I hate to think he's a well-kept secret. I just don't think that we've earned the right to get the attention that would shine a brighter light on Joey."

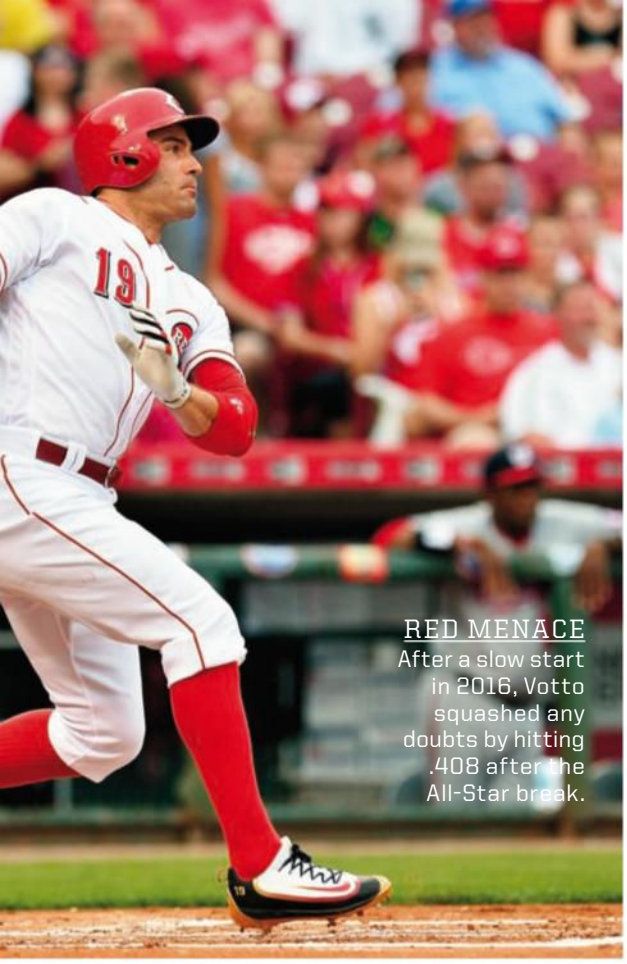
Baseball's most evolved hitter toils in relative anonymity, underappreciated by his own fans and the broader baseball world. And he doesn't mind it. "I think if I let the team's performance dictate how I behave," says Votto, "or how I perceive my performance, or whether or not there's value, or whether or not anyone even cares, it's a dangerous and slippery slope."

But surely some part of Votto must find it harder to do what he does on a team like this, a team whose radio broadcaster said in January that the owner should trade Votto and tell him, "Hell, I can lose 94 games without you just as easily as I could lose 94 games with you"?

"No, not at all," Votto says. "No matter what, I'm being paid to perform. I, personally, have standards that I have set for myself. I'd like to achieve those and look back without regret."

Though the Reds made three playoff appearances from 2010 through '13, the team has entered each of the last two off-seasons as definite sellers. It would have made some sense to deal Votto, who is signed to a long but, by today's standards, not obscene contract.

JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES



RED MENACE
After a slow start in 2016, Votto squashed any doubts by hitting .408 after the All-Star break.

(He is owed $22 million this year, and $25 million for each of the six years after that.) Since July the team has traded veterans Jay Bruce and Brandon Phillips, committing belatedly but in earnest to a full-scale rebuild.

But Votto, who has a no-trade clause, doesn't want to go anywhere. "As I get older I'm connected more to the city, and to people in the city," he says. "I own a home there. I'm out and about in the community all the time." So that's that.

Votto will be the Reds' oldest starting position player, and its longest-tenured. And a young lineup like this one (average age excluding Votto: 26) could learn from him. Centerfielder Billy Hamilton already has.

Hamilton says, "I like him way more now than I used to—not in a bad way." He says he was once afraid to talk to the notoriously intense Votto or even look his way; since then Votto has helped him get out of his own head when he hits. In the process the first baseman has become Hamilton's best friend on the team.

"It's hard, though," says Hamilton, "for him to tell somebody how to hit, when he's that good. He knows what he wants to hit and exactly where he wants to hit the ball. . . . He's so good at knowing what he wants and sticking to it."

In an era when superstars routinely abandon their first teams for contenders or bigger markets, Votto could indeed be said to be sticking to what he knows he wants. The Reds' big machine keeps quietly humming away. □

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (HOLT); RON VESELY/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

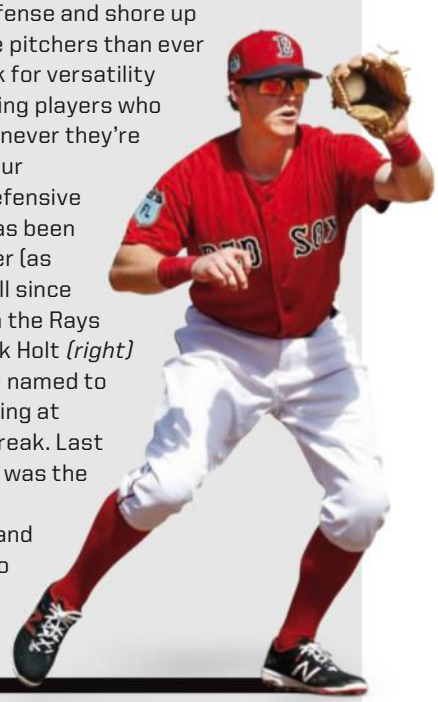
14

★THE UTILITY COMPANY★

HANDY MEN

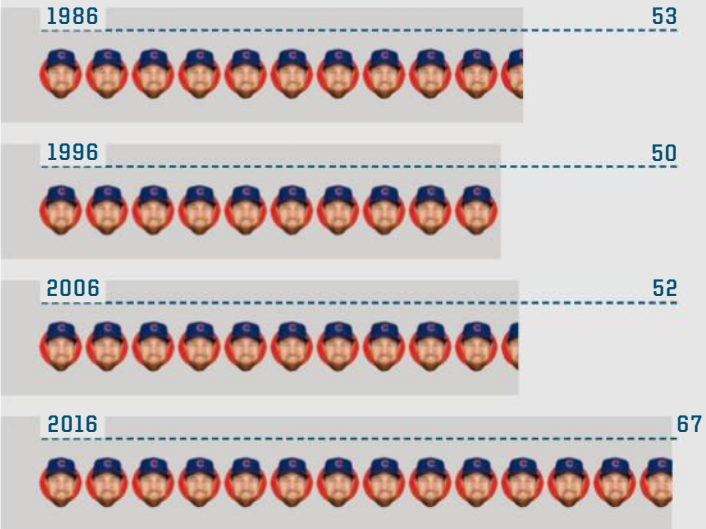
VERSATILE DEFENSIVE PLAYERS ARE HAVING A MOMENT —AND THEY'RE NOT ALL GLOVE BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN

● IF YOU find yourself struggling to keep track of who's on first this season, you're not alone. As managers search for ways to create offense and shore up defense—while carrying more pitchers than ever before—they've begun to look for versatility from every roster spot, seeking players who can slot in wherever and whenever they're needed. And these are not your grandfather's light-hitting defensive replacements. Ben Zobrist has been the 10th-most-valuable player (as measured by WAR) in baseball since jump-starting this trend with the Rays in 2008; in '15, Boston's Brock Holt *(right)* became the first player to be named to the All-Star Game after starting at seven positions before the break. Last season the Cubs' Kris Bryant was the first MVP to start more than 45 games in both the infield and the outfield. We're on track to see even more Swiss Army knife players this year.



NUMBER OF UTILITY PLAYERS IN MLB BY YEAR (IN ZOBRISTS)*

= 5 utility players



*Players with at least three games a season at three or more positions—including at least one infield and one outfield spot (or catcher and any two others)

★ THE RETURN OF GOD ★

HOME SWEET HOMERS

AFTER ROCKETING TO STARDOM IN KOREAN BASEBALL, ERIC THAMES IS TAKING ONE MORE SHOT AT BIG LEAGUE FAME

BY TOM VERDUCCI

THE BABE RUTH OF KOREA is a Jesuit prep school graduate who is built like Terry Crews, wears a beard down to his chest, and was nicknamed God. But Eric Thames's rock star life in Changwon reached its most outrageous point one late night last year.

"I was on a date," he says. "We were on the street kissing, and a fan came up, hit me on the shoulder and was like, 'Hey, can you sign?'

"Wouldn't matter if it was six in the morning, three in the morning, a dark alley or what. It was crazy. Because of my look—the beard, the tattoos—and because of what I did on the field, I couldn't go anywhere."

This year Thames said goodbye to South Korea, where for the past three seasons he put up video game numbers for the NC Dinos (.348 with 124 homers in 388 games), to take his second crack at fame in major league baseball. His first stint here, in which he bounced among the Toronto, Seattle, Baltimore and Houston organizations, was nondescript. Now, at age 30, he has a rebuilt swing, a newly found love of meditation and visualization, and the security of a three-year, $16 million contract to play first base for the Brewers.

"Our expectation is for him to be a productive major league player," says Brewers general manager David Stearns, who not only signed him without anyone from the organization scouting him in person but also cut Chris Carter, the 2016 NL home run champion, to make room for him. "There's a wide range of outcomes, and we recognize that."

Like Cecil Fielder, who left for Japan in 1989 because of sporadic playing time and production in the majors (.243 with 31 home runs in 220 games), Thames (.250, 21 HRs in 181 games) left for Korea after the 2013 season to play every day and for a better paycheck. His slash line there for three seasons (.348/.450/.720) resembles the career slash line for Ruth (.342/.474/.690). Korean fans, who bestowed the God nickname on him, loved Thames as much for his outsized personality as for his home runs. He was so popular he had his own line of watches. Thames wore metallic gold arm and leg guards and celebrated home runs with a choreographed two-man skit that ended with a teammate tugging his beard and the two of them spinning on their heels to give a military-style salute to the home fans.

"Uh, not here," says Thames, who this spring wore white body armor. "You want me to get hit in the ribs?"

Says Brewers outfielder Ryan Braun, "Our fans are going to love him. I mean, look at the way he's built. The guy's ripped. It's sick. All he needs to do is walk past the weight room, look in, and he gets even bigger and more shredded."

When Fielder returned from Japan at age 26, he hit 51 home runs and drove in 132 runs for the 1990 Tigers. One projection model, Steamer, forecasts Thames to slug

COURTESY OF ERIC THAMES (TOP); JENNIFER STEWART/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT)

.515 this season—better than Kris Bryant. But he will see more velocity than he saw in Korea, bigger ballparks and a more grueling schedule. (Though some aspects of MLB life are healthier: "Over there, they all smoke," says Thames. "There's a fifth-inning smoke break. The umpires run in, the coaches run in. It smells like a casino in the locker room.")

Says Brewers manager Craig Counsell, "What we saw on tape was he made an adjustment to his swing. It's flatter. Players should be rooting for him. It opens up a whole new avenue for second chances."

On April 5, 2012, Thames was the Opening Day leftfielder for the Blue Jays. Over the next 20 months, he bounced from Toronto to Las Vegas to Seattle to Tacoma to Sarasota to Norfolk to Oklahoma City to Caracas to Changwon. Asked why he gave up celebrity for Milwaukee, Thames said, "The challenge. I knew if I stayed, yeah, the money would have been great. Good environment. But I knew if I stayed I'd always ask myself, If I came back here, what would have happened? Because I'm not the same player I was."

Already improbable, his journey now has another twist. Where will it take him? As his many fans in Korea might regard it, God is in the details. □

POWER UP

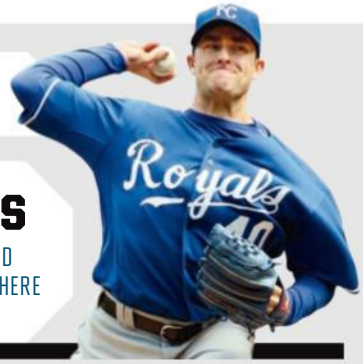
Before joining the Brewers (below left), Thames hit .348/.450/.720 in three seasons with the NC Dinos (left).

★ THE DATA TRANSLATORS ★

PITCH WHISPERERS

HOW TO PUT BASEBALL'S FLOOD OF NEW STATS AND INFO TO USE? IT TAKES A TRANSLATOR WHO'S BEEN THERE

BY TOM VERDUCCI



● TECHNOLOGIES SUCH as Pitchf/x, which launched in most major league parks in 2007, and Statcast, which became public in '15, capture the speed, spin, movement, release point and location of every pitch—that would be all 715,838 of them thrown just last season, creating millions of data points. This deluge of information has presented teams with a key question: *Now what do we do with it?*

The answer increasingly is to hire young, numbers-savvy former pitchers to translate the data into usable, customized strategies for current pitchers. These recent retirees serve as adjuncts to the traditional pitching coach. Though they answer to various titles, they are the Pitch Whisperers.

Arizona GM Mike Hazen is at the forefront of the Pitch Whisperers trend. As Boston's GM in 2015 he hired Brian Bannister *(above)*, now 36. After being hired by the Diamondbacks this off-season, Hazen created a position for Dan Haren, also 36. Bannister, who had a five-year major league career, is Boston's assistant pitching coach, who travels with the team and works primarily with pitcher development. Haren, who pitched for eight teams over 13 years, works mostly from home devising specific game plans as Arizona's pitching strategist.

"In any industry where there is a disruptive technology, in this case Pitchf/x, it creates nontraditional roles," Bannister says. "At the major league level it's always about competitive advantages and giving your players better information."

Just months into his job with Boston, Bannister used analytics to persuade journeyman Rich Hill to throw his high-spin curveball more often and with various shapes. Since then Hill is 14-6, and this winter he earned a $48 million contract from the Dodgers. Last year Bannister used analytics to show Rick Porcello that the shape of his hybrid cutter-slider caused weak contact or missed swings. "That encouraged me to throw it more—and it worked out," says Porcello, who won the Cy Young Award.

Bannister was an early adopter of sabermetrics in his 37-50 career and planned to launch pitching instructional centers when the Red Sox called. He loves analogies, such as calling the traditional pitching coach the trusted caddie for pitchers. What does that make Bannister?

"I'm the guy in the truck by the driving range," he said, "customizing clubs for the players." □

OTTO GREULE JR/GETTY IMAGES (BANNISTER)

PSYCHOLOGIST,

MR. SUNSHINE
During nonstop workdays, Roberts, the reigning NL Manager of the Year, remains unfailingly optimistic.

★ THE STATE-OF-THE-ART SKIPPER ★

MACRO MANAGING

STRATEGIST, COUNSELOR, COMEDIAN, FACE OF THE FRANCHISE: THE MODERN BASEBALL MANAGER FILLS AN ABSURD ARRAY OF ROLES, AS A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE DODGERS' DAVE ROBERTS REVEALS

BY TOM VERDUCCI
Photographs by **Rob Tringali**

IT IS 7:03 in the chilly gloaming of an Arizona morning, but Dave Roberts's smile is at full luminosity as he walks through the doors of the Dodgers' spring training complex.

"Sorry I'm late," says the Los Angeles manager, who was all of three minutes tardy. "Stopped for coffee."

Roberts is about to begin just one of his 205 scheduled days in uniform, after pitchers and catchers reported on Feb. 15. This one will include the Dodgers' spring training opener, and Roberts shared it with SI—granting exclusive access, from private meetings with coaches and players to a seat next to him in the dugout.

With the game's long season, no person represents a sports franchise in more ways and more often than a baseball manager. As information has made stars of front office executives, the manager has become the conduit between theory and practice, numbers and heartbeats. Roberts, 44, is the template of the modern skipper, and not just because last season, as a rookie, he was named National League Manager of the Year after leading L.A. to the West Division title despite a record 606 pitching changes and 28 players on the disabled list. A cancer survivor who's unfailingly optimistic, a UCLA graduate with a history degree who's at ease working with one of MLB's most intellectual and hands-on front offices,

Roberts is well-equipped to excel at the manager's most important role: fostering a positive workplace environment.

Despite being a 28th-round pick, Roberts forged a 10-year career as an outfielder. Upon beating Hodgkin's lymphoma before the 2010 season, he returned as a Padres first base coach. In 2015, Roberts interviewed with the Mariners for their managing job, but lost out to Scott Servais. President of baseball operations Andrew Friedman reached out to Roberts. He was considered a long shot. "I had no history with him," Friedman says. "Jerry [Dipoto, the Mariners GM] raved about him. We have a fairly grueling interview process. He absolutely nailed it."

Friedman hired the son of an African-American Marine father and a Japanese mother, the Dodgers' first minority manager. Roberts brought L.A. to within two wins of the team's first pennant since 1988. "Which comes first, winning or chemistry?" Roberts says. "I think it's chemistry. Last year we fell eight games back, but came back because of chemistry. Spring training is big because that's when chemistry starts."

7:20 A.M. Roberts meets in his office with Tarrik Brock, the baserunning coordinator, for a report about bunting drills from the previous day.

7:55 A.M.

7:30 A.M.

8:30 A.M.

NOON

7:30 As players arrive, Roberts enthusiastically shouts hello to each one as they pass his door. "Hey, B-Mac! Hey, Tolesy!"

7:35 Pitching coach Rick Honeycutt visits the manager's office to go over plans for the game today.

7:55 Roberts sits for an interview outside with L.A. broadcaster Jim Hill.

8:20 In his office, door closed, Roberts studies his lineup card. "My quiet time alone," he says. "We're starting with Kersh [Clayton Kershaw], then Alex Wood, Fabio Castillo and Josh Ravin, another guy with a big arm. This early, it's mostly about the pitching. The hitting will come around."

8:30 Next door, Roberts meets with coaches. Bullpen catcher Rob Flippo outlines the day's schedule. Roberts then asks coaches if they have a joke of the day. None do. He turns to Maury Wills, the 84-year-old former Dodgers shortstop.

"Maury, you got a joke for us?

"Well, I had one," Wills says, "but this group is kind of young, so I'm going to pass."

8:45 Roberts holds his daily team meeting in the clubhouse. It's a time to build bonds. Prospects Alex Verdugo and Willie Calhoun were given a homework assignment: Chart the birthplaces of every player on the roster. Seven players had also been assigned to cover a rodeo as news reporters.

"Let's meet Brett Eibner," Roberts says.

Eibner, an outfielder, stands and says he played at Arkansas, and last year he was with the Royals and A's.

"What do you like to do? Hobbies?"

"Well, because I am recently engaged . . . "

"Congratulations."

"Thank you. I had a double whammy with Valentine's Day and my fiancée's birthday was the day after."

"So what did you get her?"

"She's a big Starburst gum fan. I got her a big box of that. Her birthday was the big gift: a Siberian husky.

Somebody shouts, "Did the gum go over well?"

"It did. She's about halfway through the box already."

Says coach Bob Geren, "Get her a solid dental plan?"

9:10 Back in his office, Roberts phones his wife, Tricia, awakening her. "Just wanted to call you before I went out on the field," he says.

9:15 Roberts does an interview for the team's flagship radio station, KLAC 570.

9:30 Roberts holds his morning media session outside.

10:00 The team is on the field for its workout. Roberts shakes hands with players or pats them on the shoulder

11:30 A.M.

2 P.M.

1:40 P.M.

or back. "I put my hands on everybody every day," he says. "I don't know where I got it from. I just do."

10:30 Roberts walks to a field with minor leaguers. "I have to give the younger guys some love," he says.

11:30 Players are taking batting practice, including shortstop Corey Seager, third baseman Justin Turner and rightfielder Yasiel Puig. Roberts speaks with all of them.

"Yasiel and I have a good relationship. If I have to step in, I will. Showing up late? That doesn't fly, and he knows it."

Puig rolls over on a pitch, a grounder to third base.

"Five!" Turner calls out. To get Puig to hit more balls in the air, Turner has Puig do five pushups every time he hits a ground ball.

"First and third, one out," Turner calls out. Puig rolls over again, a bouncing ball to third.

"Ten!"

11:50 Friedman visits with Roberts on the field. They talk about lefthander Hyun-Jin Ryu, who has pitched only one game in the past two years due to shoulder trouble and had a bullpen session that morning. "Ryu looked good," Roberts says.

"That's like an old pair of favorite jeans that you thought were lost but then were found," says Friedman.

NOON Roberts signs autographs on his way back to the clubhouse. He signs caps, helmets, baseballs and a baby—on the back of a onesie.

12:10 While Roberts is meeting with Friedman and Dodgers vice president Lon Rosen, Magic Johnson calls. "I can't wait to pour champagne on you," says Johnson, who has been a part owner since 2012.

1:05 Kershaw mutters on the four of his 12 deliveries that don't go exactly where he intended, including a changeup, the one pitch he never has mastered. "He'll be thinking about that pitch all day," Roberts says.

2:00 "Way to stay with it, Pat!" Roberts says, complimenting umpire Pat Hoberg on calling a low slider to Turner.

2:05 Roberts begins to pull starters. His lineup card is intentionally chaotic. He rarely puts the reserve into the same spot as the starter he replaces. "You think through where you want guys hitting," he says. "Games like this make it easier to run a National League game during the season."

3:00 Roberts doesn't leave the dugout. His pitching changes are all scripted. Next is Castillo, a 28-year-old who has pitched in Mexico and Korea. "He threw the ball well in winter league, so we'll see," Roberts says.

3:45 With L.A. up 5–3, Roberts asks a pitcher wearing number 90, with no name on the back, to close. "Don't ask me about him," Roberts says, "because I don't know much." The reliever is Edward Paredes, who came from minor league camp and closes out the game on two strikeouts.

"One-and-oh!" Roberts says as he shakes hands. "The first of many."

4:00 Roberts meets with the media.

4:05 Around a long table in a meeting room, Roberts reviews the game with his coaches. They agree that Castillo and Paredes deserve longer looks. First base coach George Lombard points out how Eibner, playing rightfield, hustled full tilt toward the foul line to back up the throw on grounders, a habit coaches are trying to impress upon Puig. "Guys, it was a good clean game," Roberts says. "Great job."

4:15 Roberts has one more meeting, with Friedman and Honeycutt. His day has been nonstop, with only five-minute breaks for breakfast and lunch at his desk. Behind his desk is a bottle of Red Stitch wine. Roberts, along with his former teammate Rich Aurilia, is a part owner of the Northern California vineyard. A manager doesn't have much time for diversions, but Roberts won't abandon his passion.

"It's wine," he says. "Wine and food and family. I can't wait to get that glass of wine, and it allows me to reflect on the day. I talked to my wife one time. It's like this from 7 a.m. to right now, and it's not over. And you have to be on all day. But you know what? It's great. I'd rather be nowhere else in the world." □

TURN THE PAGE | for an even better reason to pay attention to the Dodgers this season. . . .

★ 2017 MLB PREVIEW

SCOUTING RE

IN PREDICTING success for even the best baseball teams, there's usually a caveat: *If they stay healthy*. They'll win the division, *if they stay healthy*. They'll go deep in the playoffs, *if they stay healthy*.

But that caveat may not apply to the Dodgers. In 2016 they set an all-time MLB record for players sent to the disabled list, with 28—even losing the best pitcher in the known universe, Clayton Kershaw, for more than two months—yet still won 91 games and made it to the NLCS. This season they're even deeper, expecting a full season from Rich Hill and more innings from maturing ace-in-waiting Julio Urías, with plenty of capable fill-ins for the back of the rotation. Manager Dave Roberts has brought a calm, upbeat energy and helped soothe a once-testy clubhouse, and runaway 2016 Rookie of the Year winner Corey Seager is the highlight of a stacked lineup. Then, of course, there's the $236 million payroll, which certainly doesn't hurt. While the Dodgers haven't won the World Series since 1988, they've won the NL West en route to the playoffs four years in a row. Keep going to the barber, and eventually you'll get a haircut. (The same could be said of SI's World Series picks—surely one of these years we're bound to be right.)

A number of teams could win it all this year if things break right for them. But L.A. is the one best positioned to win even when things go wrong.

HOW THEY'LL FINISH

AL EAST	W-L	GB
1. **RED SOX**	95-67	–
2. **BLUE JAYS**	87-75	8
3. **YANKEES**	83-79	12
4. **RAYS**	81-81	14
5. **ORIOLES**	79-83	16

AL CENTRAL	W-L	GB
1. **INDIANS**	96-66	–
2. **TIGERS**	83-79	13
3. **ROYALS**	73-89	23
4. **TWINS**	69-93	27
5. **WHITE SOX**	65-97	31

AL WEST	W-L	GB
1. **ASTROS**	91-71	–
2. **RANGERS**	89-73	2
3. **MARINERS**	88-74	3
4. **ANGELS**	72-90	19
5. **A'S**	67-95	24

NL EAST	W-L	GB
1. **NATIONALS**	91-71	–
2. **METS**	90-72	1
3. **BRAVES**	78-84	13
4. **MARLINS**	77-85	14
5. **PHILLIES**	74-88	17

NL CENTRAL	W-L	GB
1. **CUBS**	95-67	–
2. **CARDINALS**	85-77	10
3. **PIRATES**	83-79	12
4. **BREWERS**	70-92	25
5. **REDS**	64-98	31

NL WEST	W-L	GB
1. **DODGERS**	93-69	–
2. **GIANTS**	87-75	6
3. **ROCKIES**	83-79	10
4. **DIAMONDBACKS**	82-80	11
5. **PADRES**	60-102	33

POSTSEASON PREDICTIONS

AL WILD CARD
MARINERS over **RANGERS**

AL DIVISION SERIES
INDIANS over **MARINERS**
RED SOX over **ASTROS**

AL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES
INDIANS over **RED SOX**

NL WILD CARD
METS over **GIANTS**

NL DIVISION SERIES
CUBS over **METS**
DODGERS over **NATIONALS**

NL CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES
DODGERS over **CUBS**

WORLD SERIES
DODGERS over **INDIANS**

PORTS

SOPHOMORE SURGE
The Dodgers and shortstop Corey Seager, who's coming off a .308/.365/.512 rookie season, are ready to go all the way.

Photograph by
Ric Tapia/Icon Sportswire/AP

MODEST PROPOSALS
by **Joe Sheehan**

POINT TAKEN
The Sox scored more runs than any team in baseball in 2016 with David Ortiz; shortstop Xander Bogaerts and his teammates will try to do it again without Big Papi.

RED SOX

MANAGER JOHN FARRELL
5TH SEASON WITH BOSTON

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
2B DUSTIN PEDROIA	R-R	.318	.376	.449	5.6
SS XANDER BOGAERTS	R-R	.294	.356	.446	3.7
LF ANDREW BENINTENDI (R)	L-L	.295	.359	.476	0.6
RF MOOKIE BETTS	R-R	.318	.363	.534	9.6
DH HANLEY RAMÍREZ	R-R	.286	.361	.505	.2.8
CF JACKIE BRADLEY JR.	L-R	.267	.349	.486	5.3
3B PABLO SANDOVAL	S-R	.245	.292	.366	-0.9*
1B **MITCH MORELAND**	L-L	.233	.298	.422	0.7
C SANDY LEÓN	S-R	.310	.369	.476	2.7

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
STATS FROM 2016

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
UT BROCK HOLT	L-R	.255	.322	.383	1.2
C CHRISTIAN VÁZQUEZ	R-R	.227	.277	.308	-0.3

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH **CHRIS SALE**	17-10	3.34	9.3	4.9
RH RICK PORCELLO	22-4	3.15	7.6	5.1
LH DAVID PRICE	17-9	3.99	8.9	3.0
RH STEVEN WRIGHT	13-6	3.33	7.3	2.1
LH DREW POMERANZ	11-12	3.32	9.8	4.0

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH CRAIG KIMBREL	31	3.40	14.1	0.9
RH **TYLER THORNBURG**	13	2.15	12.1	2.5

*2015 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

For the first time in his tenure, John Farrell must build an every-day lineup without David Ortiz. He'll also have to decide where to bat rookie sensation **Andrew Benintendi**. The No. 2 spot would be a nice landing place, between two great righties in Dustin Pedroia and Mookie Betts, protecting him against lefty relievers. (Benintendi hit .179 in the majors in 28 at bats against lefties.) He has the on-base skills to get on for Betts and Hanley Ramirez, the speed to advance on their hits and the pop to drive in Pedroia. It's the perfect spot for Benintendi.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP BOSTON

OVERALL RANK 2

Chris Sale's delivery looks terrible, but it always has. That doesn't mean he's *not* gonna blow out tomorrow, but I'm not afraid of that. . . . Having Sale is great for **Rick Porcello** because it takes the heat off him. He commanded his fastball and threw strikes with his curve all year. It doesn't come around often that someone commands two pitches in the zone that well. . . . I'm not a **David Price** guy. He's never won big games. His velocity's down and he's having a tough time making the adjustment. . . . **Steven Wright**'s got the right nature. He knows he's got a trick pitch and he doesn't take himself too seriously. . . . **Craig Kimbrel** is one of the best relievers in baseball. He struggled the first part of last year. Is he on the slide? I think he's gonna be O.K. You bring an NL guy into the AL, there are twice as many hitters and you can't just blow people away. . . . **Tyler Thornburg** is gonna scuffle early for that same reason. . . . **Sandy León** was unbelievable last year. Everything he hit dropped in. I don't know if that'll happen again . . . **Pablo Sandoval** was a million pounds last year—he looked like Archie Bunker—but he lost weight and his feet have always been good. Boston fans will cut him some slack—until he hits .220. Then they'll hate him again. . . . Boy, this is a good outfield! It's a good group of kids too. It's the best outfield in the AL, mostly because of **Mookie Betts**. I like everything about him. . . . Once **Andrew Benintendi** learns to lift, he'll add a little power. . . . **Blake Swihart** has had a nice spring and **Christian Vázquez** is the best catcher of the three they've got. Some teams don't have any.

BOTTOM LINE | The best team in the division by a lot, and one of the top two in the American League.

MATT BROWN/ANGELS BASEBALL LP/GETTY IMAGES (BOGAERTS); BILLIE WEISS/BOSTON RED SOX/GETTY IMAGES (SALE); ROBBIE ROGERS/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (BENINTENDI)

BLUEJAYS

MANAGER JOHN GIBBONS
5TH SEASON WITH TORONTO

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
2B	DEVON TRAVIS	R-R	.300	.332	.454	2.9
3B	JOSH DONALDSON	R-R	.284	.404	.549	7.4
RF	JOSÉ BAUTISTA	R-R	.234	.366	.452	1.0
DH	**KENDRYS MORALES**	S-R	.263	.327	.468	0.9
SS	TROY TULOWITZKI	R-R	.254	.318	.443	3.3
C	RUSSELL MARTIN	R-R	.231	.335	.398	1.7
1B	JUSTIN SMOAK	S-L	.217	.314	.391	-0.4
LF	EZEQUIEL CARRERA	L-L	.248	.323	.356	0.7
CF	KEVIN PILLAR	R-R	.266	.303	.376	3.4

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF	**STEVE PEARCE**	R-R	.288	.374	.492	2.3
OF	MELVIN UPTON JR.	R-R	.238	.291	.402	1.4

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	MARCO ESTRADA	9-9	3.48	8.4	3.4
RH	AARON SANCHEZ	15-2	3.00	7.5	4.8
LH	J.A. HAPP	20-4	3.18	7.5	4.4
RH	MARCUS STROMAN	9-10	4.37	7.3	1.4
LH	FRANCISCO LIRIANO	8-13	4.69	9.3	0.3

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	ROBERTO OSUNA	36	2.68	10.0	2.0
RH	JASON GRILLI	4W	4.12	12.4	0.4

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

One of the odder transactions from 2016 was the Jays' decision to give **Justin Smoak** a two-year, $8.5 million contract extension. He's a .220 hitter without enough walks, power, speed or defensive skill at first base to make up for that average, and at 30, there's no development left. Toronto has a logjam of players—Smoak, Kendrys Morales, José Bautista, Steve Pearce—without much to contribute defensively. The Jays should release Smoak to free up playing time at DH and first. This would also allow the 36-year-old Bautista to spend less time in rightfield, giving better defenders a shot there.

ENEMY LINES

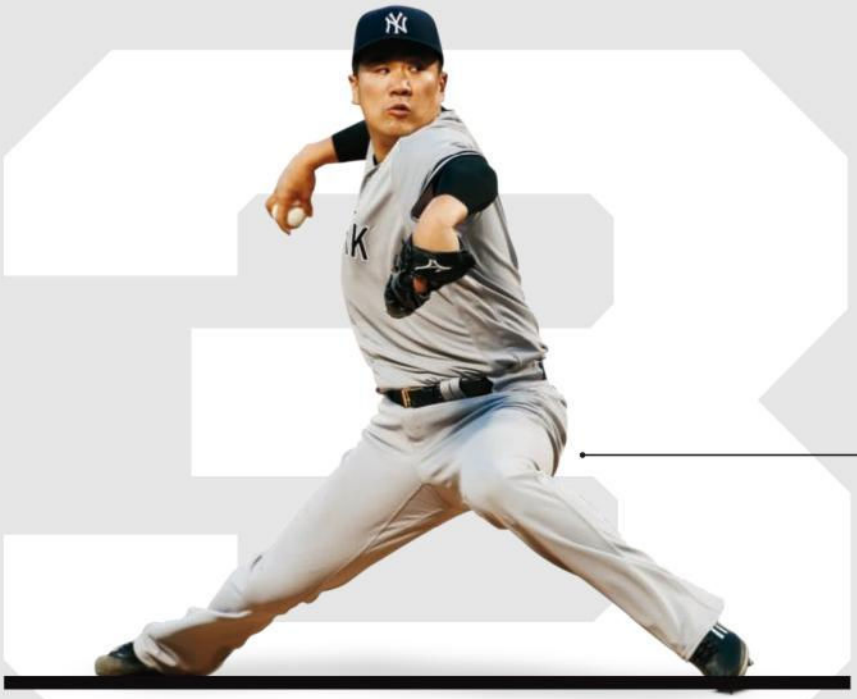
A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP TORONTO

OVERALL RANK 6

This is a solid lineup with dangerous power, but, boy, are they going to miss Edwin Encarnación. They'll be competitive, but not as strong as they were in 2015 and '16. . . . **Josh Donaldson** understands his swing and how to generate power from his lower half. . . .**José Bautista** just had a down year. He had become much more of a mistake hitter. I expect him to bounce back. . . . There's something left for **Troy Tulowitzki**, but it's time to s--- or get off the pot. Last year he looked to me as if he'd become pull crazy and was not trusting his hands. . . . **Devon Travis** hits the ball hard and has a chance to hit over .300. . . . **Russell Martin** has all the intangibles that are important to a young pitching staff. Even if he doesn't hit, he's worth every penny he gets. . . . **Kevin Pillar** is off the charts defensively. He's as good as Kevin Kiermaier or anybody else. If the bat caught up to the defense, he'd be Mike Trout. . . . Orioles closer Zach Britton's sinker is in another universe, but **Aaron Sanchez**'s is right behind his. It's powerful and has late action in the zone. . . . **Marcus Stroman**, I love his confidence and his stuff. . . . **J.A. Happ** is deceptive, with average to slightly above average stuff. He's an awful good No. 3 starter. . . . **Marco Estrada** has a 75 grade changeup. There's a lot of deception, a lot of swing and miss. . . . **Francisco Liriano** is getting his slider over. If he does that, he's got enough fastball to keep guys honest. . . . **Roberto Osuna** has power and a power breaking ball. He throws strikes with two well-above-average pitches.

BOTTOM LINE | Still a force, but without Encarnación they'll have trouble passing the Red Sox.

TOM SZCZERBOWSKI/GETTY IMAGES (DONALDSON); MIKE CARLSON/MLB PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES (SMOAK)



YANKEES

MANAGER JOE GIRARDI
10TH SEASON WITH NEW YORK

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
LF	BRETT GARDNER	L-L	.261	.351	.362	3.4
CF	JACOBY ELLSBURY	L-L	.263	.330	.374	2.8
C	GARY SÁNCHEZ	R-R	.299	.376	.657	3.0
DH	**MATT HOLLIDAY**	R-R	.246	.322	.461	0.3
1B	GREG BIRD	L-R	.261	.343	.529	0.9*
SS	DIDI GREGORIUS	L-R	.276	.304	.447	2.2
2B	STARLIN CASTRO	R-R	.270	.300	.433	1.2
RF	AARON JUDGE (R)	R-R	.270	.366	.489†	
3B	CHASE HEADLEY	S-R	.253	.331	.385	2.6

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
STATS FROM 2016

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
1B	CHRIS CARTER	R-R	.222	.321	.499	0.9
OF	AARON HICKS	S-R	.217	.281	.336	-0.3

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	MASAHIRO TANAKA	14-4	3.07	7.4	5.4
RH	MICHAEL PINEDA	6-12	4.82	10.6	1.2
LH	CC SABATHIA	9-12	3.91	7.6	3.0
RH	LUIS SEVERINO	3-8	5.83	8.4	-0.3
RH	CHAD GREEN	2-4	4.73	10.2	0.2

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH	**AROLDIS CHAPMAN**	36	1.55	14.0	2.5
RH	DELLIN BETANCES	12	3.08	15.5	1.1

*2015 STATS †MINOR LEAGUE STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Dave Righetti, Mariano Rivera, Dellin Betances . . . **Luis Severino**? The next great Yankees reliever is right in front of them. Severino, who touched 99 mph in early March, has a 5.32 ERA in 22 career starts and a 0.39 mark in 11 relief appearances. The 6' 2" righty missed time last year with a right triceps strain, adding to questions about whether he can carry a starter's heavy workload. The slow development of his changeup would matter less if he were a reliever, as well. All signs point to Severino eventually being a dominant back-end hurler; New York should get on with it.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP NEW YORK

OVERALL RANK 8

There are a lot of pieces here to look forward to. . . . **Gary Sánchez** has learned to use the whole field. He's really matured as a hitter. . . . **Greg Bird** can be an offensive star. He doesn't have massive power, but Yankee Stadium is going to be beneficial for a young lefthanded hitter. . . . If **Starlin Castro** and **Didi Gregorius** can play consistently with one another, this is going to be a very competitive team. Both are a little streaky. . . . **Jacoby Ellsbury** has really regressed, and with his injury history, **Aaron Hicks** could replace him. . . . **Aaron Judge** has incredible raw power. They'll put him at the bottom of the order and tell him, "The season doesn't rely on you." . . . **Matt Holliday** will be a good mentor for these kids. I think he'll still produce too. . . . If **Masahiro Tanaka** is over his injury, he's a top-end guy. He's got a wipeout split that's basically unhittable when there are two strikes. . . . For two or three innings **Michael Pineda** can look like a No. 1 starter, but he just seems to lack focus. He's still pitching like he's 20. . . . If the lightbulb comes on, **Luis Severino** is lights out. He's 96–100 mph, with a quality slider. . . . With the training **Aroldis Chapman** has done, he's taken his ability to a whole other level. And they won't have to extend him because they have a solid bullpen. . . . **Dellin Betances**'s curveball is unhittable. Couple that with a 96–98 mph fastball and that's a tough at bat. . . . Shortstop **Gleyber Torres** will probably spend another year in the minors, but he's going to be a really impactful major league player.

BOTTOM LINE | With so much young talent in the Bronx, the future is bright, but the present is still partly cloudy.

RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES (TANAKA); ROBBIE ROGERS/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (SEVERINO)

RAYS

MANAGER KEVIN CASH
3RD SEASON WITH TAMPA BAY

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF KEVIN KIERMAIER	L-R	.246	.331	.410	5.5
2B BRAD MILLER	L-R	.243	.304	.482	1.6
3B EVAN LONGORIA	R-R	.273	.318	.521	3.8
DH COREY DICKERSON	L-R	.245	.293	.469	1.5
SS MATT DUFFY	R-R	.258	.310	.357	1.6
LF **COLBY RASMUS**	L-L	.206	.286	.355	2.2
RF STEVEN SOUZA	R-R	.247	.303	.409	0.9
1B LOGAN MORRISON	L-L	.238	.369	.414	0.4
C CURT CASALI	R-R	.186	.273	.336	0.9

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF TIM BECKHAM	R-R	.247	.300	.434	1.3
OF **RICKIE WEEKS**	R-R	.239	.327	.450	-0.1

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH CHRIS ARCHER	9-19	4.02	10.4	1.7
RH JAKE ODORIZZI	10-6	3.69	8.0	3.0
RH ALEX COBB	10-9	2.87	8.1	3.9*
LH BLAKE SNELL	6-8	3.54	9.9	0.8
RH MATT ANDRIESE	8-8	4.37	7.7	1.0

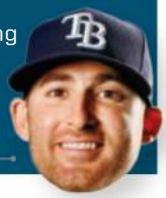
	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH ÁLEX COLOMÉ	37	1.91	11.3	2.2
RH BRAD BOXBERGER	41	3.71	10.6	0.2†

*2014 STATS †2015 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Re-signing Logan Morrison, even to a one-year, $2.5 million deal, was a curious decision. The 29-year-old Morrison is a career .245/.325/.416 batter who plays indifferent defense at first base, and he hit .238/.319/.414 last year before a wrist injury ended his season. The Rays would be better off leaving 27-year-old **Brad Miller** who exploded for 30 homers last year, at first, and giving **Nick Franklin** (who played all over the field last year) the second base job and just releasing Morrison. If you're going to re-create the 2014 Seattle Mariners, you may as well play the best of the bunch.



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP TAMPA BAY

OVERALL RANK 9

Tampa is going to be rough. They're going to have to pitch their brains out. . . . I love **Chris Archer**. He has ace stuff. . . . **Alex Cobb** is throwing the ball well. It's been a bad stretch for him. He's pitched better than I thought he would this spring coming off the arm injury. . . . **Jake Odorizzi** is a good middle-rotation guy. He could be the next guy traded. . . . They're not going to score any runs. Let's put it this way—they're counting on **Colby Rasmus**, who hit .200 for Houston. . . . There are some rings on **Evan Longoria**'s tree, but he had a very good power year. Can he do that again? For this offense, he'd better. . . . **José De Leon** is supposedly really good, but when I saw him, he didn't get anybody out. If he is a bust, that's a giveaway trade. Logan Forsythe was a good hitter and a leader. . . . **Kevin Kiermaier** is a terrific centerfielder, the energizer bunny of the AL. . . . **Steven Souza** has to have a better year. He hit .240, with power. He's going to have to hit .280, with power. . . . **Matt Duffy** has to get back to where he was when he came up with the Giants. Playing in Tropicana Field will help. . . . **Rickie Weeks** is a decent veteran with a good bat, but when you put him in the field, you're in trouble. . . . It would be nice if **Tim Beckham** put it together. Then they could move **Brad Miller** back to first. **Logan Morrison**'s there for now, but he's not the answer. . . . The Rays are like a mini-Baltimore, but without the closer and their bullpen is dreadful. . . . Can this club advance above the five hole in this division? I don't think so.

JASON O. WATSON/GETTY IMAGES (KIERMAIER); ELSA/GETTY IMAGES (MILLER)

BOTTOM LINE | Pitching wins championships, but with this team the question is, Can it keep them from last place?

ORIOLES

MANAGER BUCK SHOWALTER
8TH SEASON WITH BALTIMORE

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF ADAM JONES	R-R	.265	.310	.436	1.1
3B MANNY MACHADO	R-R	.294	.343	.533	6.7
1B CHRIS DAVIS	L-R	.221	.332	.459	3.0
DH MARK TRUMBO	R-R	.256	.316	.533	1.6
2B JONATHAN SCHOOP	R-R	.267	.298	.454	2.1
C **WELINGTON CASTILLO**	R-R	.264	.322	.423	2.4
RF **SETH SMITH**	L-L	.249	.342	.415	0.5
SS J.J. HARDY	R-R	.269	.309	.407	1.9
LF HYUN SOO KIM	R-R	.302	.382	.420	0.6

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C CALEB JOSEPH	R-R	.174	.216	.197	-1.0
UT PEDRO ÁLVAREZ	L-R	.249	.322	.504	0.7

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH KEVIN GAUSMAN	9-12	3.61	8.7	4.2
RH DYLAN BUNDY	10-6	4.02	8.5	1.7
RH CHRIS TILLMAN	16-6	3.77	7.3	4.1
LH WADE MILEY	9-13	5.37	7.4	-0.1
RH UBALDO JIMÉNEZ	8-12	5.44	7.9	0.1

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH ZACH BRITTON	47	0.54	9.9	4.3
RH DARREN O'DAY	3	3.77	11.0	0.6

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Last year the Orioles had the fewest stolen base attempts, just 32, since attempts began being tracked in 1951. (They succeeded 19 times.) And rightly so: With a high-homer, low-singles offense, risking an out to move up a base didn't make much sense. It's not as if the lack of steals significantly hurt them—they finished seventh in the AL in runs scored and won a wild-card spot. With the Orioles bringing back almost the same roster, but even slower with **Seth Smith** and **Welington Castillo**, it opens up the question: Can a team go an entire season without attempting a steal? Buck Showalter may want to give it a try.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP BALTIMORE

OVERALL RANK 10

This team will live and die with the home run and their bullpen, like last year. You look up *micromanage* in the dictionary, you'll see a picture of Buck Showalter. But he is ahead of most every manager in the game when it comes to matchups. . . . **Chris Tillman** is dinged up a little. He's a great competitor, throws hard enough, commands his breaking stuff. Is he an ace? No, but he pitches like one. . . . **Kevin Gausman**'s the guy with the stuff, but those LSU kids never really turn the corner. . . . **Dylan Bundy** is finally starting to realize his potential. . . . **Ubaldo Jiménez** used to be a hard thrower; now he throws 90. He's slowly learning how to pitch. . . . Their strength is the bullpen. They've got the best reliever in baseball. **Zach Britton** has a natural sinker that's one of the best pitches I've ever seen. . . . **Jonathan Schoop** is a great defender with great range and a great arm. He'll be a perennial All-Star. . . . **Manny Machado**'s anticipation is great, which is why he can play third base so easily, but he's a natural shortstop. He's Derek Jeter with better range. . . . **Mark Trumbo** is a great mistake hitter. That little bitty ballpark is a perfect match for him. They've played him a lot in rightfield during the spring, probably to prove to him that he can't play out there. . . . **Adam Jones** is an All-Star. He's a good defender, he can throw, he can run, he can hit. . . . **Welington Castillo** is a hitter; **Caleb Joseph** is a catcher. **Chance Sisco** will be the guy next year or the year after. . . . They can't catch Boston, but they've got a shot at a wild card. Not a big shot, but a shot.

BOTTOM LINE | Again, thanks to its manager and third baseman, this team is more than the sum of its parts.

JASON MILLER/GETTY IMAGES (JONES); ROBBIE ROGERS/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (SMITH)

PITCHED BATTLE
Corey Kluber has finished in the top 10 of Cy Young voting each of the past three years (including a win in '14), and his dazzling postseason performance last season bodes well for the Indians' championship hopes.

INDIANS

MANAGER TERRY FRANCONA
5TH SEASON WITH CLEVELAND

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
1B	CARLOS SANTANA	S-R	.259	.366	.498	3.0
2B	JASON KIPNIS	L-R	.275	.343	.469	4.1
SS	FRANCISCO LINDOR	S-R	.301	.358	.435	5.7
DH	**EDWIN ENCARNACIÓN**	R-R	.263	.357	.529	3.7
LF	MICHAEL BRANTLEY	L-L	.310	.379	.480	3.4*
3B	JOSÉ RAMÍREZ	S-R	.312	.363	.462	3.9
RF	LONNIE CHISENHALL	L-R	.286	.328	.439	1.4
C	YAN GOMES	R-R	.167	.201	.327	-0.8
CF	TYLER NAQUIN	L-R	.296	.372	.514	0.9

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C	ROBERTO PÉREZ	R-R	.183	.285	.294	0.5
OF	BRANDON GUYER	R-R	.266	.372	.423	1.7

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	COREY KLUBER	18-9	3.14	9.5	6.4
RH	CARLOS CARRASCO	11-8	3.32	9.2	3.6
RH	DANNY SALAZAR	11-6	3.87	10.6	2.9
RH	TREVOR BAUER	12-8	4.26	8.0	3.0
RH	JOSH TOMLIN	13-9	4.40	6.1	1.6

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	CODY ALLEN	32	2.51	11.5	2.1
LH	ANDREW MILLER	12	1.45	14.9	3.9

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS *2015 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

No one expects Terry Francona to export his playoff bullpen management philosophy to the regular season, not least because that would project **Andrew Miller** to pitch 208⅔ relief innings. But the one principle you'd like to see him retain from the Indians' long October run is this: Saves aren't everything. Who pitches the ninth or the eighth isn't as critical as who they're facing. If Francona can use **Cody Allen** and Miller against the hitters they match up best with, regardless of inning, he can get the same value from his relievers that he did during the playoffs without putting crazy workloads on their arms.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP CLEVELAND

OVERALL RANK 1

Unless something goes wrong, they're the favorite to win the division and advance far into the playoffs. . . . After Clayton Kershaw, **Corey Kluber** might be the first guy I'd pick if I were putting together a team. The spin on his breaking pitches is unbelievable. He's a cold-hearted killer. . . . **Carlos Carrasco** uses his split-finger well, and plays off his fastball and slider. . . . **Trevor Bauer** has got all sorts of pitches, but he doesn't throw quite enough strikes. . . . **Danny Salazar** throws hard with so much ease. He could be a No. 1 starter at some point. . . . **Cody Allen** gets overlooked because of **Andrew Miller**, but you give him the ball in the ninth and the game is over. . . . Miller throws near 100 and is as valuable a pitcher as there is. . . . **Edwin Encarnación** will hit 40 home runs, and he doesn't strike out. That's a great combination. . . . **Carlos Santana** will only get better. His ability to switch-hit with power is really valuable. . . . **Francisco Lindor** has a flair for the game, and there's pop in his bat. I expect him to compete for MVP. . . . I was floored that **José Ramírez** had the season he did last year, but it was legit. The guys in the clubhouse love him. . . . **Michael Brantley** hits both lefties and righties well, and he's got good range. He might get a slow start, though, coming back from the shoulder injury. . . . On a perfect team **Tyler Naquin** would be a fourth outfielder, but he can swing the bat. . . . **Bradley Zimmer**, an outfielder, is going to be a real good player. I'm not sure he's ready, but he's a 6' 5" power guy who can run.

BOTTOM LINE | You can't get any closer to a championship than this team did last year—and they've improved.

JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (KLUBER); ROSS D. FRANKLIN/AP PHOTO (ENCARNACION); ALEX TRAUTWIG/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (ALLEN)

TIGERS

MANAGER BRAD AUSMUS
4TH SEASON WITH DETROIT

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
2B	IAN KINSLER	R-R	.288	.348	.484	6.1
RF	J.D. MARTINEZ	R-R	.307	.373	.535	1.8
1B	MIGUEL CABRERA	R-R	.316	.393	.563	4.9
DH	VÍCTOR MARTÍNEZ	S-R	.289	.351	.476	1.6
LF	JUSTIN UPTON	R-R	.246	.310	.465	2.0
3B	NICK CASTELLANOS	R-R	.285	.331	.496	1.6
CF	TYLER COLLINS	L-L	.235	.305	.382	-0.2
C	JAMES MCCANN	R-R	.221	.272	.358	1.1
SS	JOSÉ IGLESIAS	R-R	.255	.306	.336	1.8

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C	ALEX AVILA	L-R	.213	.359	.373	1.0
UT	ANDREW ROMINE	S-R	.236	.304	.322	0.3

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	JUSTIN VERLANDER	16-9	3.04	10.0	6.6
RH	MICHAEL FULMER	11-7	3.06	7.5	4.8
RH	JORDAN ZIMMERMANN	9-7	4.87	5.6	0.2
RH	ANIBAL SÁNCHEZ	7-13	5.87	7.9	-1.2
LH	DANIEL NORRIS	4-2	3.38	9.2	1.5

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	FRANCISCO RODRÍGUEZ	44	3.24	8.0	1.1
LH	BRUCE RONDON	0	2.97	11.1	0.9

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

After a quiet winter in which their biggest move was the trade of Cameron Maybin, the projected lineup for the Tigers features seven righthanded batters and switch-hitter Víctor Martínez. Having a lefthanded-hitting centerfielder is important, but lefty Tyler Collins is overmatched defensively by the spacious pasture in Comerica Park. The Tigers can help both the balance in their batting order and their defense by giving **Anthony Gose** another shot at the everyday job. Gose, who would bat ninth, hit .254/.321/.367 with 23 steals as the starter in 2015 and, at only 26 years old, hasn't lost a step.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP DETROIT

OVERALL RANK 7

Do these guys have one more run in them? I think so—they're not as good as Cleveland, but I can see a wild-card spot. . . . The key is **Jordan Zimmermann** bouncing back and giving them a big season. He tried to pitch with an injured oblique, maybe to justify the big contract, and it caught up with him. I think he'll come back. . . . **Michael Fulmer** has legitimate stuff. He reminds me of Zimmermann in that he's always in attack mode with the breaking stuff and is a super aggressive, competitive kid. . . . That's a formidable top three, with **Justin Verlander**. It's going to be impossible for him to duplicate what he did last season, but I love that he no longer relies only on the strikeout and knows how to save his bullets. He's made some big adjustments that are going to extend his career. . . . It's mind-boggling that after all these years, they still haven't figured out their closer situation. I'm sorry, but **Frankie Rodríguez** isn't going to cut it. **Bruce Rondon** is their only chance to stabilize the bullpen short of going out and getting a closer. I think Rondon will be closing for them by the All-Star break. . . . This is a great place for **Justin Upton** to just relax, learn from **Miguel Cabrera** and **Víctor Martínez** and put up big numbers. There's nothing he can do but learn, and there were flashes in the second half of things coming back together for him. He's going to put up big numbers. . . . This is still a very scary lineup—the veteran hitters know what they're doing. But if one of their old superstars goes down, things will go south in a hurry.

JOHN WILLIAMSON/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (FULMER); TONY FIRRIOLO/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (GOSE)

BOTTOM LINE | A contender with stars on the mound and at the plate, but just an injury or two away from disaster.

ROYALS

MANAGER NED YOST
8TH SEASON WITH KANSAS CITY

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
SS	ALCIDES ESCOBAR	R-R	.261	.292	.350	0.3
3B	MIKE MOUSTAKAS	L-R	.284	.348	.470	4.4*
CF	LORENZO CAIN	R-R	.287	.339	.408	2.9
1B	ERIC HOSMER	L-L	.266	.328	.433	1.0
C	SALVADOR PÉREZ	R-R	.247	.288	.438	2.8
LF	ALEX GORDON	L-R	.220	.312	.380	0.8
RF	JORGE SOLER	R-R	.238	.333	.436	0.2
DH	BRANDON MOSS	L-R	.225	.300	.484	0.8
2B	WHIT MERRIFIELD	R-R	.283	.323	.392	1.6

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF	CHRISTIAN COLÓN	R-R	.231	.294	.293	0.6
OF	PAULO ORLANDO	R-R	.302	.329	.405	2.3

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH	DANNY DUFFY	12-3	3.51	9.4	4.2
RH	IAN KENNEDY	11-11	3.68	8.5	4.1
LH	JASON VARGAS	11-10	3.71	6.2	0.5†
RH	JASON HAMMEL	15-10	3.83	7.8	1.6
RH	NATE KARNS	6-2	5.15	9.6	0.2

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	KELVIN HERRERA	12	2.75	10.8	2.0
RH	JOAKIM SORIA	1	4.05	9.2.	0.5

*2015 STATS †2014 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Since the start of 2013, no one has caught more innings—4,662—than **Salvador Pérez**. He has led all AL catchers in the category the last three seasons, and the majors in 2014 and '15. (And in 2015, he caught 142 postseason innings too.) Perhaps this is why Pérez hits worse in September than the Jacksonville Jaguars. He batted .179/.247/.295 down the stretch last season, and .234/.274/.362 combined over the past three Septembers. Ned Yost, a former backup catcher himself, has to offload more innings to Drew Butera during the summer to keep Pérez fresher later in the year.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP KANSAS CITY

OVERALL RANK 12

Everything hinges on how the tragic death of pitcher Yordano Ventura affects the team, on and off the field. He had his issues, but he was a great teammate. . . . **Eric Hosmer** is MVP caliber, a Triple Crown candidate. Last year, with all the club's injuries, he was trying to carry them, hit three home runs with one swing. His average could jump 65 points. . . . **Lorenzo Cain** is still underrated. They're a different team with him in center, and he gets the clutch hit, hits a ball out, hits for average, steals a base. . . . **Alex Gordon** looks fine as far as bat speed and in the outfield, but you want someone with a little more power in the corners. . . . **Jorge Soler** can be a bit frustrating—not real selective at the plate, takes plays off in the outfield, doesn't always run—but he's got plus-plus raw power to all fields. I could see 25, 30 homers. . . . **Brandon Moss** was a great signing. Another 25-home-run guy for a team that hasn't had many. . . . **Danny Duffy** can be a No. 1 or No. 2 on any staff. He's like David Price—that kind of stuff from the left side. Actually, Duffy has better secondary pitches. . . . **Jason Hammel** and **Travis Wood** are both quality signings, especially as pitching depth. The problem is the bullpen's not great. Wade Davis and Greg Holland are gone, and the seventh-inning guy—**Kelvin Herrera**—is now the closer. He'll be fine, but **Joakim Soria**'s not as sharp as he used to be. . . . This could be the last year in Kansas City for Cain, Hosmer, **Alcides Escobar** and **Mike Moustakas**. Having that many guys going into free agency can be tough, but I think they can contend for the AL Central title one more time.

BOTTOM LINE | It's the last hurrah for the ring holders of 2015, but hurrahs could be rare this season.

ED ZURGA/GETTY IMAGES (HOSMER); RON VESELY/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (PEREZ)

4 TWINS

MANAGER PAUL MOLITOR
3RD SEASON WITH MINNESOTA

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF BYRON BUXTON	R-R	.225	.284	.430	1.9
2B BRIAN DOZIER	R-R	.268	.340	.546	6.5
1B JOE MAUER	L-R	.261	.363	.389	2.2
3B MIGUEL SANO	R-R	.236	.319	.462	0.8
RF MAX KEPLER	L-L	.235	.309	.424	2.4
DH KENNYS VARGAS	S-R	.230	.333	.500	0.7
SS JORGE POLANCO	S-R	.282	.332	.424	0.6
C JASON CASTRO	L-R	.210	.307	.377	0.9
LF EDDIE ROSARIO	L-R	.269	.295	.421	1.1

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
INF EDUARDO ESCOBAR	S-R	.236	.280	.338	-0.6
OF ROBBIE GROSSMAN	S-L	.280	.386	.443	0.3

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	ERVIN SANTANA	7-11	3.38	7.4	3.8
LH	HECTOR SANTIAGO	13-10	4.70	7.1	1.0
RH	KYLE GIBSON	6-11	5.07	6.4	0.6
RH	PHIL HUGHES	11-9	4.40	5.4	1.8*
RH	JOSÉ BERRIOS	3-7	8.02	7.6	-1.7

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH	GLEN PERKINS	32	3.32	8.5	1.2*
RH	RYAN PRESSLY	1	3.70	8.0	1.0

*2015 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Last September, **Byron Buxton** showed flashes of the kind of star he can be, slugging .653 with nine home runs and 10 walks in 101 at bats. The Twins have used him in the leadoff spot this spring, however, and that may be an overbid. Buxton's power, speed and defense all play right now, but he may not have the OBP skills for batting first. His success last season came batting ninth, and leaving him low in the order is the best way to leverage his talents at the moment. In Brian Dozier, Robbie Grossman, Max Kepler and Joe Mauer, the Twins have other players who can bat at the top of the lineup.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP MINNESOTA

OVERALL RANK 13

There's a reason all these guys had 5 ERAs last year. The Twins used to have success developing guys who didn't throw hard but could command the fastball. Now they don't throw hard *and* they have no command. . . . **Ervin Santana**'s their ace, but he's actually a three. . . . **José Berrios** still hasn't turned the corner. I'm unimpressed by his ability to command the fastball. . . . **Glen Perkins** hasn't pitched much this spring. If he can't close for them, they're in big trouble. Well, they're in big trouble anyway. . . . They gave **Jason Castro** a lot of money to be their front-line guy. They had a good defensive catcher in Kurt Suzuki and let him walk. I would rather have Suzuki than Castro. . . . **Joe Mauer**'s health is in question, like always. He's an opposite-field hitter now. If there's a man on third, he will get him home, period. . . . **Brian Dozier** is a dead high-ball hitter, but even if he hits 30 home runs, they could lose 100 games. They should have moved him. . . . Minnesota has brought a lot of guys up before they're ready. **Byron Buxton** is still a dead pull hitter. With his speed, he should be going the other way, he should bunt, and he doesn't. . . . **Miguel Sano** can swing the bat, but he's not very good at third. You hope he knocks in more than he lets in. . . . . They keep touting their outfield—**Eddie Rosario**, Buxton, **Max Kepler**. They all have good arms, but in the major leagues your corner outfielders have to be offensive players. . . . This team has a chance to be the worst in the league.

BOTTOM LINE | Some budding stars to get excited about, but—as usual—too few of them are pitchers.

NICK WOSIKA/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (SANO); TONY FIRRIOLO/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (BUXTON)

WHITE SOX

MANAGER RICK RENTERIA
1ST SEASON WITH CHICAGO

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF	CHARLIE TILSON (R)	L-L	.282	.345	.407	--*
SS	TIM ANDERSON	R-R	.283	.306	.432	2.8
LF	MELKY CABRERA	S-L	.296	.345	.455	2.6
1B	JOSÉ ABREU	R-R	.293	.353	.468	2.8
3B	TODD FRAZIER	R-R	.225	.302	.464	3.4
RF	AVISAIL GARCÍA	R-R	.245	.307	.385	0.8
DH	CODY ASCHE	L-R	.213	.284	.350	-0.7
C	GEOVANY SOTO	R-R	.269	.321	.487	0.4
2B	TYLER SALADINO	R-R	.282	.315	.409	1.8

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF	YOLMER SÁNCHEZ	S-R	.208	.236	.357	0.0
OF	PETER BOURJOS	R-R	.251	.292	.389	0.1

		W	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH	JOSÉ QUINTANA	13-12	3.20	7.8	5.1
LH	CARLOS RODON	9-10	4.04	9.2	1.5
RH	MIGUEL GONZÁLEZ	5-8	3.73	6.3	2.0
RH	JAMES SHIELDS	6-19	5.85	6.1	-1.1
LH	DEREK HOLLAND	7-9	4.95	5.6	0.8

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	DAVID ROBERTSON	37	3.47	10.8	1.2
RH	NATE JONES	3	2.29	10.2	2.3

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS *MINOR LEAGUE STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

The White Sox released incumbent second baseman Brett Lawrie early in camp, and Tyler Saladino, a utilityman in starter's clothing, is the front-runner for the job until Yoan Moncada is ready. What about **Leury García**, though? García, a one-time top prospect with the Rangers, is still just 26. He had a .367 OBP with 18 steals at Charlotte—leadoff skills Chicago could use. True, his career .188 average argues against giving him a job, but that's in just 331 appearances over four seasons. The Sox should let García earn regular time in hopes of finding 2017's Jonathan Villar.

BOTTOM LINE | 2019 could be a great year on the South Side. 2017? Not so much.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP CHICAGO

OVERALL RANK 15

They've done a good job of rebuilding. It's tough to get too optimistic about this year, but there's still some thunder in the lineup. . . . **José Abreu** looks good, the ball is jumping off his bat. . . . . **Todd Frazier** is one of the best third basemen in the game, with plus-plus raw power. He strikes out a bit, but when he's going well, he can carry a club. . . . **Tim Anderson** plays out of control a little and makes some careless errors, still, he gives you game-changing speed . . . . The ball still jumps off **Melky Cabrera**'s bat from time to time, but everything's slowed a little. . . . **Charlie Tilson** is a player they really like, but he has a ways to go. He can run, is a plus defender, though he's never really had any power. . . . If **Avisail García** can stay in shape, he can hit 20 home runs. . . . If they keep these guys, the rotation could be pretty good. **Carlos Rodon** has shown flashes of great ability. . . . If **José Quintana** had been on a better team, he would've had 18-20 wins last year . . . **James Shields** and **Derek Holland** are fourth or fifth starters now, but Holland has the stuff to be better than that. Can he stay healthy? Probably not, no. . . . **Yoan Moncada** is one of the top prospects in baseball. He has a chance to hit for average and power, he's a plus-plus runner, and he can really throw. But they need to be patient. . . . From Washington they got **Lucas Giolito**, a power arm with all the potential in the world, and **Reynaldo López**, who's up to 100 mph. . . . The guy who could pass them both is **Dane Dunning**. Another big arm is **Michael Kopech**. . . . I think they'll be better in 2018, but it's probably the following season when they really establish these guys.

TOM SZCZERBOWSKI/GETTY IMAGES (FRAZIER); JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (GARCIA)

LAUNCH TIME
Batting champ Altuve is good with the glove too, but it's on the mound where his club needs a boost.

ASTROS

MANAGER A.J. HINCH
3RD SEASON WITH HOUSTON

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF	GEORGE SPRINGER	R-R	.261	.359	.457	5.0
2B	JOSÉ ALTUVE	R-R	.338	.396	.531	7.7
SS	CARLOS CORREA	R-R	.274	.361	.451	5.9
DH	CARLOS BELTRÁN	S-R	.295	.337	.513	2.0
C	BRIAN MCCANN	L-R	.242	.335	.413	0.9
3B	ALEX BREGMAN	R-R	.264	.313	.478	1.8
RF	JOSH REDDICK	L-R	.281	.345	.405	2.6
1B	YULIESKI GURRIEL	R-R	.262	.292	.385	0.2
LF	NORI AOKI	L-R	.283	.349	.388	1.5

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF	EVAN GATTIS	R-R	.251	.319	.508	3.0
OF	JAKE MARISNICK	R-R	.209	.257	.331	1.7

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH	DALLAS KEUCHEL	9-12	4.55	7.7	0.5
RH	COLLIN MCHUGH	13-10	4.34	8.6	1.2
RH	MIKE FIERS	11-8	4.48	7.2	0.3
RH	LANCE MCCULLERS	6-5	3.22	11.8	1.6
RH	CHARLIE MORTON	9-9	4.81	6.7	-0.8*

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	KEN GILES	15	4.11	14.0	-0.2
RH	LUKE GREGERSON	15	3.28	10.5	0.6

*2015 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Having signed Carlos Beltrán and Josh Reddick and traded for Brian McCann, the Astros have sharply increased their team age and accelerated their timeline for winning. Even with that, though, they're short one piece—a frontline starting pitcher. Dallas Keuchel's 2016 performance was a reminder of his limitations, while Lance McCullers has never thrown more than 160 innings in a season. To hold off the Rangers and the Mariners, they must spend more prospect depth—righty **Francis Martes** or outfielder **Kyle Tucker**—on a top-end hurler. The Braves' Julio Teheran would be the perfect fit.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP HOUSTON

OVERALL RANK 3

We all thought they were on the cusp of dominating after their playoff breakthrough two years ago, but this team has some big flaws. . . . I'd be worried about the durability and depth of the staff. **Dallas Keuchel** is just not a Cy Young–caliber pitcher. He's more the guy we saw last year, allowing a hit per inning, with a four-something ERA. He has never had dominating stuff, and hitters have made adjustments. . . . **Lance McCullers** is the guy with the lights-out stuff, but health is a big issue. . . . They paid a steep price for **Ken Giles** and he had a rough start, but that was just a hiccup—a guy going from one league to another. His troubles are behind him. . . . . I like the offense. **Yulieski Gurriel** is the unknown. He's not a huge power guy, but he can control the bat. But he's also 32, so there's not a ton of upside. . . . **Josh Reddick** comes to a hitter-friendly park—he's going to put up some good numbers. He's a bounce-back candidate, for sure. . . . **Alex Bregman** is a hard contact guy who puts the barrel on the bat. I love this kid. He's not going to light it up with power, but he'll hit for average. He reminds me of Dustin Pedroia. . . . **Carlos Beltrán**, with the leadership he offers to a young team that needs it, is a perfect fit. This is one more reason why **Carlos Correa** could be the MVP this year. . . . **George Springer** is an enigma. The talent is off the charts, but he's also a 180-strikeout guy. If he cuts down on them, he's Mike Cameron—a nice power-speed combination. . . . **Brian McCann**'s skills are diminishing, but he still has power, and with that short porch in left, he could put up surprising numbers.

BOTTOM LINE | Tons of talent at bat and in the field, but can the team of the future become the team of today?

ERIC CHRISTIAN SMITH/AP (ALTUVE); JOEL AUERBACH/GETTY IMAGES (BELTRAN); DOUG MURRAY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MARTES)

RANGERS

MANAGER JEFF BANISTER
3RD SEASON WITH TEXAS

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF CARLOS GÓMEZ	R-R	.231	.298	.384	0.1
DH SHIN-SOO CHOO	L-L	.242	.357	.399	0.3
3B ADRIÁN BELTRÉ	R-R	.300	.358	.521	6.4
1B MIKE NAPOLI	R-R	.239	.335	.465	1.0
2B ROUGNED ODOR	L-R	.271	.296	.502	2.4
C JONATHAN LUCROY	R-R	.292	.355	.500	3.8
RF NOMAR MAZARA	L-L	.266	.320	.419	0.4
SS ELVIS ANDRUS	R-R	.302	.362	.439	3.7
LF JURICKSON PROFAR	S-R	.239	.321	.338	0.0

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C ROBINSON CHIRINOS	R-R	.224	.314	.483	0.9
OF RYAN RUA	R-R	.258	.331	.400	0.7

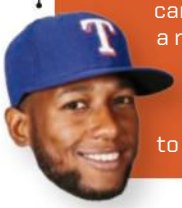
	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH COLE HAMELS	15-5	3.32	9.0	5.0
RH YU DARVISH	7-5	3.41	11.8	2.5
LH MARTÍN PÉREZ	10-11	4.39	4.7	1.8
RH A.J. GRIFFIN	7-4	5.07	8.1	0.8
RH ANDREW CASHNER	5-11	5.25	7.6	-0.7

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH SAM DYSON	38	2.43	7.0	2.9
RH MATT BUSH	1	2.48	8.9	2.1

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL



Four years after being the consensus No. 1 prospect in baseball, **Jurickson Profar** is now a platoon leftfielder with a career .652 OPS. It's been a rough ride for Profar, who missed two full seasons with shoulder injuries and never had a chance to displace Elvis Andrus at his primary position, shortstop. He's now an outfielder because there's nowhere else for him to play, which isn't ideal for either his development or the Rangers' hopes. The team should look to move him as part of a package for a starting pitcher or a true outfielder, both to add wins in 2017 and to allow Profar to get on with his career as an infielder.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP TEXAS

OVERALL RANK 4

Cole Hamels pitched great in that small ballpark over in Philly. If you can do that, you can pitch anywhere. . . . **Yu Darvish** came over from Japan with seven pitches, and they're trying to eliminate some of them because they think this had something to do with his health issues. If he's going to bounce back, this is the year. . . . **Martín Pérez** is the biggest question mark in the rotation. He has great feel, but he shows some apprehension, like he doesn't trust his stuff. . . . [Starter] **Tyson Ross** was a great signing, even though he's still recovering from surgery for thoracic outlet syndrome. He had been outstanding before that. . . . **Matt Bush** has a power fastball and he's got a second chance. I think he's going to eventually be the closer. . . . **Jonathan Lucroy** is the best two-way catcher out there. He'll be tremendous for this staff. When they have to run **Dillon Gee** or **A.J. Griffin** out there, Lucroy's value goes up even more. If you're a marginal pitcher, catchers like him can make you average. . . . I don't want **Rougned Odor** to improve his plate discipline. I know we want guys to control the zone and walk more, but some guys you want up there hacking. . . . Other than Brooks Robinson, **Adrián Beltré** is the best third baseman I've ever seen, a first-ballot Hall of Famer. He's got great hands, the cleanest exchange, can throw from all angles. . . . **Nomar Mazara**'s smooth, sweet swing reminds me of Carlos Delgado's—consistent, no wasted effort. He's going to hit for average and eventually power. . . . As much as I love **Joey Gallo**'s moonshots, he swings and misses too much.

BOTTOM LINE | Don't underestimate this perennial playoff team, but the division has improved. Have the Rangers?

JOHN WILLIAMSON/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (HAMELS); CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP (PROFAR)

MARINERS

MANAGER SCOTT SERVAIS
2ND SEASON WITH SEATTLE

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
LF	JARROD DYSON	L-R	.278	.340	.388	3.1
SS	JEAN SEGURA	R-R	.319	.368	.499	5.7
2B	ROBINSON CANÓ	L-R	.298	.350	.533	7.3
DH	NELSON CRUZ	R-R	.287	.360	.555	4.7
3B	KYLE SEAGER	L-R	.278	.359	.499	6.9
RF	MITCH HANIGER (R)	R-R	.229	.309	.404	0.1
1B	DAN VOGELBACH (R)	L-R	.292	.417	.505	--*
C	MIKE ZUNINO	R-R	.207	.318	.470	1.8
CF	LEONYS MARTÍN	L-R	.247	.306	.378	1.2

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
UT	DANNY VALENCIA	R-R	.287	.346	.446	1.4
C	CARLOS RUIZ	R-R	.264	.365	.348	1.8

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	FÉLIX HERNÁNDEZ	11-8	3.82	7.2	1.6
RH	HISASHI IWAKUMA	16-12	4.12	6.6	2.6
LH	JAMES PAXTON	6-7	3.79	8.7	1.0
RH	YOVANI GALLARDO	6-8	5.42	6.5	0.2
LH	DREW SMYLY	7-12	4.88	8.6	0.0

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	EDWIN DÍAZ	18	2.79	15.3	1.4
RH	DAN ALTAVILLA (R)	0	0.73	7.3	0.5

*MINOR LEAGUE STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Edwin Díaz was a revelation in the pen last season, striking out 40% of the batters he faced as a 22-year-old rookie. He's the one reliever Seattle has who can dominate an inning. Manager Scott Servais has to resist the temptation to overuse him, however. During one stretch in August, Díaz threw a total of 134 pitches over five outings in two weeks. At the end of the season, Servais went to Díaz for 89 pitches over seven days. Díaz had a 1.64 ERA when the heavy duty started on Aug. 17, and a 4.82 mark after. Tap the brakes, Scott.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP SEATTLE

OVERALL RANK 5

I see the Mariners as the favorites in the division. Their offense is better than the Rangers', and I like their pitching depth. With **Jean Segura**, **Robinson Canó**, **Nelson Cruz** and **Kyle Seager** at the top of the order, they'll beat you to death offensively. . . . Cruz is so consistent. With that uppercut, the rhythm and timing, and the leverage he produces, he can hit 'em out of Yellowstone. . . . Seager's not quite in the class of Manny Machado, Adrián Beltré or Josh Donaldson but he's the next third baseman you talk about. He can rake. . . . **Mike Zunino** handles the staff well. He learned some things in the minors last year and now he's capable of 25 home runs. . . . People compare **Dan Vogelbach** with Kyle Schwarber, though Schwarber has a better body and Vogelbach can only play first base. I like the big guy's presence, energy and affection for the game. . . . They wanted to get more athletic in the outfield. With **Jarrod Dyson**, **Mitch Haniger**, **Guillermo Heredia** and **Leonys Martín**, all they have out there are athletes—not much power. . . . **Félix Hernández** has put on 20 to 25 pounds of good weight. He didn't have the same zip last year. I don't know if he ever really recovered from a calf problem last spring. . . . **James Paxton** throws 97 with some effort, with a power breaking ball—unhittable. But we always project a guy like that to have some arm injuries. . . . **Hisashi Iwakuma** is going to sink the ball, pitch to contact and get a boatload of ground balls. . . . They were grooming **Edwin Díaz** to be a starter, but they turned him into a two-pitch guy and told him to let it go—nasty, filthy stuff.

BOTTOM LINE | In a tough division, they are better and deeper than in 2016; a 16-year playoff drought could end.

THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES (CANÓ); CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES (DÍAZ)

ANGELS

MANAGER MIKE SCIOSCIA
18TH SEASON WITH LOS ANGELES

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
3B YUNEL ESCOBAR	R-R	.304	.355	.391	1.6
RF KOLE CALHOUN	L-L	.271	.348	.438	3.4
CF MIKE TROUT	R-R	.315	.441	.550	10.6
DH ALBERT PUJOLS	R-R	.268	.323	.457	1.4
1B LUIS VALBUENA	L-R	.260	.357	.459	2.6
LF CAMERON MAYBIN	R-R	.315	.383	.418	1.9
2B DANNY ESPINOSA	S-R	.209	.306	.378	1.7
SS ANDRELTON SIMMONS	R-R	.281	.324	.366	4.2
C MARTÍN MALDONADO	R-R	.202	.332	.351	0.8

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
STATS FROM 2016

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF C.J. CRON	R-R	.278	.325	.467	2.1
OF BEN REVERE	L-R	.217	.260	.300	-1.2

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH GARRETT RICHARDS		15-12	3.65	7.6.	1.8*
RH RICKY NOLASCO		8-14	4.42	6.6.	1.8
RH MATT SHOEMAKER		9-13	3.88	8.0	2.0
LH TYLER SKAGGS		5-5	4.30	6.8	0.3†
RH JESSE CHAVEZ		7-15	4.18	7.8.	1.6*

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH CAM BEDROSIAN		1	1.12	11.4.	1.3
RH ANDREW BAILEY		6	5.36	8.5.	-0.2

*STATS FROM 2015 †STATS FROM 2014

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

GM Billy Eppler has done a good job crafting a competitive roster around Mike Trout, despite inheriting the game's worst farm system and a payroll weighed down with $50 million a year in obligations to Albert Pujols and Josh Hamilton, who is now with the Rangers. The Angels are still at least one piece short, but with Trout at his peak, there's every reason for them to play for the present. That means leveraging the few fruits of the recovering farm system, such as dealing OF **Jahmai Jones** to the White Sox for José Quintana. Quintana would be the Angels' No. 1 starter and push them toward the top of the wild-card pile.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP LOS ANGELES

OVERALL RANK 11

They're better than last year. I think they can get back above .500, but the health of the rotation is the question. The two upgrades they needed to make were second base and leftfield, and they did those. . . . **Danny Espinosa** is a true shortstop playing second base. He's got a plus-plus arm and he brings some offense. . . . **Cameron Maybin** brings a bit of flair and attitude to Anaheim, which they've been missing, but I don't think he'll hit for the power you'd expect with that long swing. . . . **Mike Trout** is a legitimate five-tool guy, but if you notice, he has a pronounced uppercut that you don't see a lot with righthanded hitters. You never see anyone try to bust him up and in, pitch him above the hands, where you might have some success. . . . I was pleasantly surprised with the numbers **Albert Pujols** put up last year because basically he was hobbled the whole season. He's still among the top righthanded hitters in the game. . . . **Kole Calhoun** is a plus defender with a plus arm, and he gives you great at bats. He's a little more upright with his approach now, trying to tap into more power. . . . **Garrett Richards** can be really, really good. But when you've got the delivery he has, throwing across the body so violently, it causes concern. Every time he picks up a ball they'll be holding their breath. . . . **Matt Shoemaker** won't light up the radar gun, but he understands how to change speeds and stays away from the middle of the plate. . . . I like the **Martín Maldonado**–**Carlos Pérez** catching tandem, but they'll give you more defense than offense.

DARRON CUMMINGS/AP (MAYBIN); LARRY GOREN/FOUR SEAM IMAGES/AP (JONES)

BOTTOM LINE | They've repaired some glaring weaknesses, but too many of their hurlers have injury histories.

ATHLETICS

MANAGER BOB MELVIN
7TH SEASON WITH OAKLAND

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF RAJAI DAVIS	R-R	.249	.306	.388	0.4
C STEPHEN VOGT	L-R	.251	.305	.406	2.2
DH RYON HEALY	R-R	.305	.337	.534	2.2
LF KHRIS DAVIS	R-R	.247	.307	.524	2.8
RF MATT JOYCE	L-R	.242	.403	.463	1.6
SS MARCUS SEMIEN	R-R	.238	.300	.435	3.0
3B TREVOR PLOUFFE	R-R	.260	.303	.420	0.4
1B YONDER ALONSO	L-R	.253	.316	.367	-0.1
2B JED LOWRIE	S-R	.263	.314	.322	-0.4

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF MARK CANHA	R-R	.254	.315	.426	1.1*
OF JAKE SMOLINSKI	R-R	.238	.299	.345	-0.3

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH SONNY GRAY		5-11	5.69	7.2	-0.5
RH KENDALL GRAVEMAN		10-11	4.11	5.2	3.2
LH SEAN MANAEA		7-9	3.86	7.7	2.7
RH JESSE HAHN		6-6	3.35	6.0	1.0*
RH JHAREL COTTON (R)		11-6	4.31	10.3	--†

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH RYAN MADSON		30	3.62	6.8.	1.2
LH SEAN DOOLITTLE		4	3.23	10.4.	0.9

*2015 STATS †MINOR LEAGUE STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Trevor Plouffe, Yonder Alonso, Rajai Davis, Matt Joyce, Jed Lowrie. . . . The A's have become a perennial mass of middling veterans, limping toward 74 wins. One bright spot is **Ryon Healy**, who crushed 27 homers across three levels in 2016 and hit .305/.337/.524 in 72 games in Oakland. The 25-year-old may be a fluke—he had a scary 60 strikeouts against 11 unintentional walks in the majors—but as a homegrown young player with potential and six years of control left, he's at least more interesting than teammates Plouffe and Alonso. Healy should be out there manning an infield corner every day.

ENEMY LINES

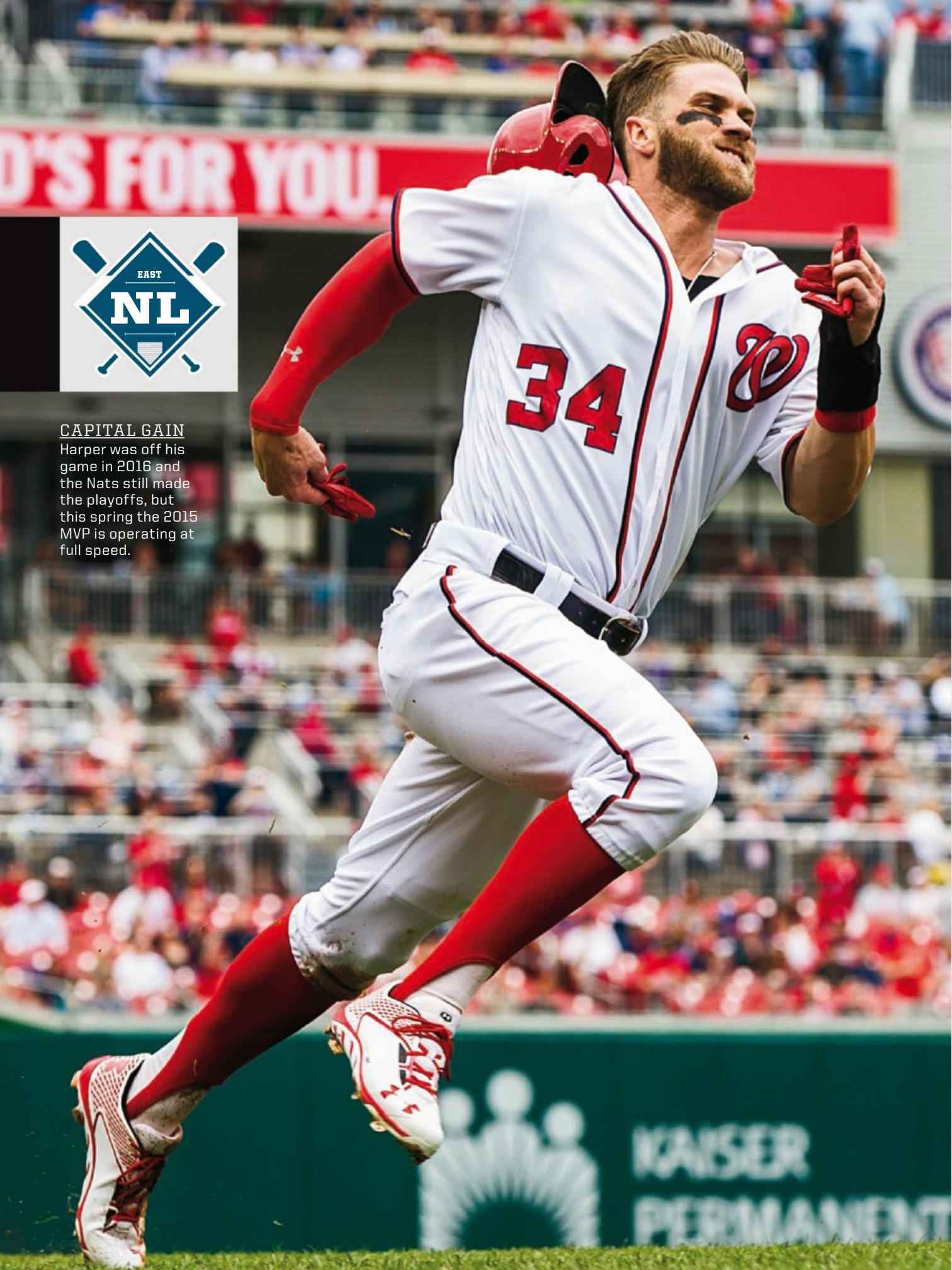
A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP OAKLAND

OVERALL RANK 14

People are really discounting this team. They could compete in this division because of their pitching depth, plus depth in their lineup. All the guys seem to be playing with a chip on their shoulder. . . . The million-dollar question is how healthy is **Sonny Gray**? He's out again, with a lat strain. . . They hit on **Kendall Graveman** when they got him in the Josh Donaldson trade. He's got power stuff, a live 94–96 mph fastball. Last year, once he figured out how to throw the ball at the middle of the plate and let it sink away, he pitched like an ace. . . . **Jharel Cotton** has charisma, a feel for pitching and keeps guys off-balance. He can touch 93–94 and he'll throw anything at you. . . . **Khris Davis** has the type of power where anything he can touch, he can hit out. But pitchers will pay more attention to him this year. . . . **Ryon Healy** is like Donaldson five years ago. He's an especially good hitter of breaking balls and did a lot of damage on secondary stuff that people thought he couldn't handle. . . . **Jed Lowrie** can hit, but sometimes he looks like a telephone pole out there. He's got one-step range, and he just came off foot surgery. Don't be surprised if **Joey Wendle**'s at second at some point. . . . **Marcus Semien** doesn't have the hands to be a plus defender, but he's the kind of guy you want your daughter to marry, so I understand why they've been patient with him. Plus he's a 20–30 home run guy who can turn on a 97-mph fastball. . . . The A's don't believe in giving out the C for captain, but **Stephen Vogt** is the guy who'd have it. He commands that staff, commands respect from every person on the roster.

BOTTOM LINE | Thanks to their pitching, they could be better than you might think . . . though probably still not good.

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES (COTTON); JASON O. WATSON/GETTY IMAGES (HEALY)



CAPITAL GAIN
Harper was off his game in 2016 and the Nats still made the playoffs, but this spring the 2015 MVP is operating at full speed.

NATIONALS

MANAGER DUSTY BAKER
2ND SEASON WITH WASHINGTON

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
SS TREA TURNER	R-R	.342	.370	.567	3.5
LF JAYSON WERTH	R-R	.244	.335	.417	0.3
2B DANIEL MURPHY	L-R	.347	.390	.595	4.6
RF BRYCE HARPER	L-R	.243	.373	.441	1.6
3B ANTHONY RENDON	R-R	.270	.348	.450	4.1
CF **ADAM EATON**	L-L	.284	.362	.428	6.2
C **MATT WIETERS**	S-R	.243	.302	.409	1.7
1B RYAN ZIMMERMAN	R-R	.218	.272	.370	-1.1

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
1B **ADAM LIND**	L-L	.239	.286	.431	-0.3
IF STEPHEN DREW	L-R	.266	.339	.524	1.0
OF CHRIS HEISEY	R-R	.216	.290	.446	0.0

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH MAX SCHERZER	20-7	2.96	11.2	6.2
RH STEPHEN STRASBURG	15-4	3.60	11.2	3.3
RH TANNER ROARK	16-10	2.83	7.4	5.5
LH GIO GONZÁLEZ	11-11	4.57	8.7	0.8
RH JOE ROSS	7-5	3.43	8.0	2.1

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH SHAWN KELLEY	7	2.64	12.4	1.4
RH **JOE BLANTON**	0	2.48	9.0	1.7

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

After years of having no true leadoff hitter, the Nationals now have two: Trea Turner was promoted last summer, and **Adam Eaton** was acquired in a trade over the winter. Dusty Baker seems committed to Turner in the No. 1 slot, which is fine, but he has been less sure of Eaton's place, batting him as low as seventh this spring. Balance is a concern, with lefties Bryce Harper and Daniel Murphy in the middle of the order, but batting Eaton low in the lineup is a waste of his OBP. He should be no lower than second; if breaking up the lefties is a concern, bat him leadoff with Turner second.

ENEMY LINES

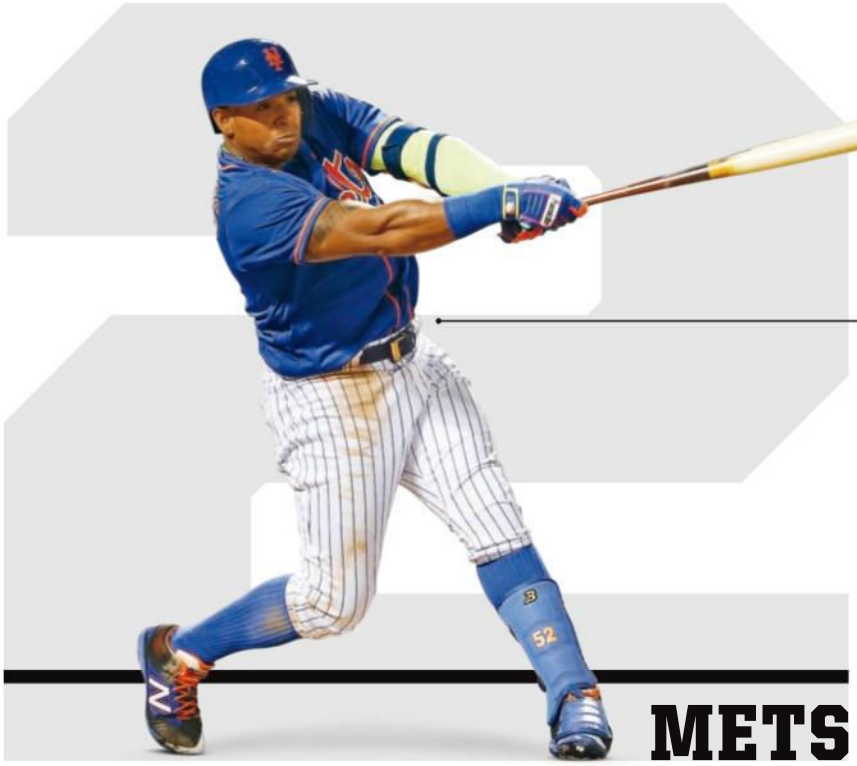
A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP WASHINGTON

OVERALL RANK 3

This is one of the only teams that can beat the Cubs, but the window is closing. . . . **Bryce Harper**'s shoulder bothered him all year, and he got out of rhythm. He's healthy now. A lot of people hate him, but I love him. He has the most controlled violent swing I've ever seen. . . . The sky is the limit for **Trea Turner**. He can run and throw, he's got good hands, he's a good hitter. . . . **Adam Eaton** is a true centerfielder and top-of-the-order bat. . . . **Daniel Murphy** has tremendous ability to get his barrel into the zone, keep it in the zone and hit the ball hard. . . . **Anthony Rendon** has a great approach, short and quick to the ball. . . . The wear and tear **Ryan Zimmerman** has had on his shoulder and arm—he's just not the same. . . . **Matt Wieters** will do a great job managing the staff and the game. That was a good signing. . . . **Max Scherzer** might be at the top of my list if I had to win a game and my life depended on it. . . . Every little ache ends up a DL trip for **Stephen Strasburg**, but he's still extremely gifted. . . . I love **Tanner Roark**. He looks like he could be sitting at the bar from *Cheers*, but he has four quality pitches. . . . **Gio González** can't pitch just on stuff any more. He's got to command better. . . . **Joe Ross** has the stuff to be a No. 3 starter. . . . Hopefully all of **Shawn Kelley**'s save opportunities come with a two-run lead. I like him in the seventh or eighth inning. . . . I like **Koda Glover** and **Blake Treinen**. Either has the stuff to close. . . . **Michael Taylor** got to the big leagues too soon and struggled. He lost a lot of confidence.

BOTTOM LINE | A healthy Harper and some well-matched additions could push the Nats deep into October.

ROB TRINGALI/SPORTSCHROME/GETTY IMAGES (HARPER); PATRICK MCDERMOTT/WASHINGTON NATIONALS/GETTY IMAGES (SCHERZER); ELIOT J. SCHECHTER/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (EATON)



METS

MANAGER TERRY COLLINS
7TH SEASON WITH NEW YORK

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
3B JOSÉ REYES	S-R	.267	.326	.443	0.4
CF CURTIS GRANDERSON	L-R	.237	.335	.464	2.5
LF YOENIS CÉSPEDES	R-R	.280	.354	.530	2.9
RF JAY BRUCE	L-L	.250	.309	.506	0.6
2B NEIL WALKER	S-R	.282	.347	.476	2.4
SS ASDRUBAL CABRERA	S-R	.280	.336	.323	2.7
1B LUCAS DUDA	L-R	.229	.302	.506	0.6
C TRAVIS D'ARNAUD	R-R	.229	.302	.412	0.1

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
UT T.J. RIVERA (R)	R-R	.333	.345	.476	0.6
OF JUAN LAGARES	R-R	.239	.301	.380	0.8
OF MICHAEL CONFORTO	L-R	.220	.310	.414	0.4

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH NOAH SYNDERGAARD	14-9	2.60	10.7	6.0
LH JACOB DEGROM	7-8	3.04	8.7	3.7
RH MATT HARVEY	4-10	4.86	7.4	0.1
LH STEVEN MATZ	9-8	3.40	8.8	2.8
RH ROBERT GSELLMAN (R)	4-2	2.42	8.5	1.4

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH JEURYS FAMILIA	51	2.55	9.7	2.0
RH ADDISON REED	1	3.53	10.5	2.9

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

For all the attention paid to their young rotation, the Mets' everyday lineup is now among the oldest in baseball—and more than half of the starting lineup can depart at the end of the season. This feels like a last chance for this group. With that in mind, the Mets should move from developing those young starting pitchers to riding them. Their chances hinge on big seasons from **Noah Syndergaard**, **Jacob deGrom** and **Steven Matz**. The three made 76 starts and threw 464 innings in 2016. Let them carry full workloads, rather than managing them for a future the Mets may not even own.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP NEW YORK

OVERALL RANK 4

Yoenis Céspedes is so strong and such a good mistake hitter. . . . **José Reyes** still has good hands and plenty of arm. . . . [Hitting coach] Kevin Long got **Curtis Granderson** back into taking the ball the other way. . . . Last year **Jay Bruce**'s timing was off. He was giving away at bats. He'll bounce back. . . . A healthy **Lucas Duda** could be a potent bat at the bottom of the order. . . . **Travis d'Arnaud** has been kind of a bust. A lot of it is due to injuries. He's shown flashes but it seems like he has amnesia and can't remember the adjustments he has made. . . . **Wilmer Flores** is still a good infield option, even at shortstop for a day. I feel bad for him—had he been given an opportunity to play every day, he might've become a pretty good hitter. . . . **Michael Conforto** got rushed to the big leagues, and his holes were discovered. He's not there yet. . . . The odds have to be against **David Wright** getting healthy. I admire that he wants to keep trying. . . . **Noah Syndergaard** is scary good. There's a good cockiness too. . . . Last year **Jacob deGrom** started to feel something in his elbow, but this spring he was throwing free and easy. . . . **Matt Harvey** is an enigma. But last year his stuff was nowhere near what it is now. . . . **Steven Matz** has a chance to be a No. 2 starter. . . . **Robert Gsellman**'s stuff is crisper. He used to pick Bartolo Colón's brain, and that has helped. . . . **Jeurys Familia**'s stuff wasn't as good late in the season. He has been ridden hard. **Fernando Salas** or **Addison Reed** could fill in for him.

RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES (CESPEDES); JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (DEGROM)

BOTTOM LINE | There are some injury concerns for their great starters, but any team would gladly take them.

BRAVES

MANAGER BRIAN SNITKER
2ND SEASON WITH ATLANTA

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF	ENDER INCIARTE	L-L	.281	.351	.381	3.8
SS	DANSBY SWANSON (R)	R-R	.302	.361	.442	0.9
1B	FREDDIE FREEMAN	L-R	.302	.400	.569	6.5
LF	MATT KEMP	R-R	.268	.304	.499	0.0
RF	NICK MARKAKIS	L-L	.269	.346	.397	1.7
2B	**BRANDON PHILLIPS**	R-R	.291	.320	.416	0.8
3B	ADONIS GARCÍA	R-R	.273	.311	.406	0.2
C	TYLER FLOWERS	R-R	.270	.357	.420	0.3

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C	**KURT SUZUKI**	R-R	.258	.301	.403	0.4
UT	JACE PETERSON	L-R	.254	.350	.366	0.4
IF	CHASE D'ARNAUD	R-R	.245	.317	.335	0.1

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	JULIO TEHERAN	7-10	3.21	8.0	4.8
RH	**BARTOLO COLÓN**	15-8	3.43	6.0	3.4
LH	**JAIME GARCÍA**	10-13	4.67	7.9	0.8
RH	**R.A. DICKEY**	10-15	4.46	6.7	0.4
RH	MIKE FOLTYNEWICZ	9-5	4.31	8.1	1.4

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	JIM JOHNSON	20	3.06	9.5	1.5
RH	ARODYS VIZCAÍNO	10	4.42	11.6	-0.5

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

If you're going to sign **Bartolo Colón** and **R.A. Dickey** as rotation ballast while your young pitchers come along, you may as well get the most out of them. Since Colón is an ultradurable strike-thrower and Dickey is a knuckleballer, the Braves should lean heavily on the two for innings on an otherwise low-endurance staff—especially when contention isn't really likely. Getting seven innings per start from each of the two veterans would take pressure off a young, promising bullpen and free Brian Snitker to handle Jaime García, Mike Foltynewicz, Matt Wisler and Aaron Blair with more care.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP ATLANTA

OVERALL RANK 10

They'll be moving into a new ballpark, and unlike last year's team, they'll be watchable, maybe even interesting. But a contender? No. . . . **Matt Kemp**'s getting out of the Hollywood scene and coming to Atlanta, where he can just focus on baseball, is a great thing for him. He'll never get back to MVP caliber, but he still has one or two All-Star seasons in him. . . . **Ender Inciarte** is one of the more underrated players. He does everything well, including Gold Glove defense, and he's just entering his prime. . . . **Nick Markakis** sets up the whole lineup. He's finally healthy, and he could still earn his contract, but his defense is holding him back from being a valuable player. . . . **Dansby Swanson** is a true grinder, plays plus defense and plays hard and seems wise beyond his years. His offensive numbers won't be eye-popping, but he'll be a mainstay for years to come. . . . **Brandon Phillips** is a guy who took advantage of the ballpark in Cincinnati to put up big numbers. But he's trending downward. . . . **Julio Teheran** is never going to be your Verlander-type ace; his stuff is not that good. But I always like seeing total power guys learn how to pitch, and he's done that. . . . Old horses **Bartolo Colón** and **R.A. Dickey** will give them decent innings, and the team can save the young starters. . . . John Hart did it in Cleveland, was patient with the development process as he took a bad team and made it competitive. The Braves will be in the hunt, but young-stud arms like **Kolby Allard**, **Touki Toussaint** and **Ian Anderson** are at least two years away.

BOTTOM LINE | Downright presentable for a rebuilding team, but not yet ready for a return to the playoffs.

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (COLÓN); MATTHEW STOCKMAN/GETTY IMAGES (DICKEY)

MARLINS

MANAGER DON MATTINGLY
2ND SEASON WITH MIAMI

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
2B DEE GORDON	L-R	.268	.305	.335	0.8
3B MARTÍN PRADO	R-R	.305	.359	.417	3.8
CF CHRISTIAN YELICH	L-R	.298	.376	.483	5.3
RF GIANCARLO STANTON	R-R	.240	.326	.489	2.5
LF MARCELL OZUNA	R-R	.266	.321	.452	2.5
1B JUSTIN BOUR	L-R	.264	.349	.475	1.2
C J.T. REALMUTO	R-R	.303	.343	.428	2.6
SS ADEINY HECHAVARRIA	R-R	.236	.283	.311	1.2

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C **A.J. ELLIS**	R-R	.216	.301	.298	-0.1
IF MIGUEL ROJAS	R-R	.247	.288	.325	-0.2
OF ICHIRO SUZUKI	L-R	.291	.354	.376	1.5

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH WEI-YIN CHEN	5-5	4.96	7.3	-0.7
RH **EDINSON VÓLQUEZ**	10-11	5.37	6.6	-0.8
LH ADAM CONLEY	8-6	3.85	8.4	1.5
RH **DAN STRAILY**	14-8	3.76	7.6	4.3
RH TOM KOEHLER	9-13	4.33	7.5	0.5

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH A.J. RAMOS	40	2.81	10.3	1.2
RH **BRAD ZIEGLER**	22	2.25	7.7	2.2

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

There may be no team in baseball with a larger gap between the quality of its bullpen (potentially dominant) and the quality of its starting rotation (potentially disastrous). For the Marlins to chase down the Mets and the Nationals, Don Mattingly will have to push as many innings as possible to his deep corps of relievers, from **David Phelps**, **Kyle Barraclough** and **Junichi Tazawa** starting in the sixth—or earlier—to **A.J. Ramos** and **Brad Ziegler** in the late innings. The Marlins just can't ride their mediocre rotation, tragically missing late ace José Fernández, much past five innings a night.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP MIAMI

OVERALL RANK 11

After the death of **José Fernández**, they're going to have a cloud hanging over them. No organization can just bounce back from that. . . . The big question is the rotation. **Wei-Yin Chen** slots as the No. 1 guy, and as bad as he was last year, I think he'll live up to his $80 million contract. It's clear he was trying to pitch through elbow issues last season. He should be solid—but he's just not an ace to slot against the Syndergaards and Strasburgs. . . . I don't love the addition of **Edinson Vólquez**. I saw a big drop in stuff and control—he's no more than a fifth starter. . . . **Adam Conley** has a higher upside than **Tom Koehler**. Koehler is a nice grinder, but Conley, if he can command better, could emerge as a very good No. 2. . . . In the bullpen the rising star is **Kyle Barraclough**. He's got an above average fastball and a slider that's good when it's on. When he learns how to command the strike zone, he'll be elite. . . . This offense is going to win a lot of high-scoring games. **Dee Gordon** isn't an everyday All-Star, but his speed causes havoc, and he's an impact player on defense. . . . **Christian Yelich** is a perennial batting-title threat. . . . Is there something seriously wrong with **Giancarlo Stanton**? This will be the telling year, if he'll ever be the same player he was before his head injury. I'm convinced he's never going to be more than a .275 guy. If he doesn't hit 50 bombs, how can he be one of the highest-paid players on the planet? . . . They need some young arms to develop, or they're about to go through a rough stretch.

BOTTOM LINE | Missing José Fernández on and off the field, they don't have the pitching to contend in the East.

CHRIS LEE/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH/TNS/GETTY IMAGES (STANTON); CHRIS TROTMAN/GETTY IMAGES (ZIEGLER)

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PHILLIES

MANAGER PETE MACKANIN
3RD SEASON WITH PHILADELPHIA

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
2B CÉSAR HERNÁNDEZ	S-R	.294	.371	.393	3.3
LF HOWIE KENDRICK	R-R	.255	.326	.366	0.5
CF ODUBEL HERRERA	L-R	.286	.361	.420	4.2
3B MAIKEL FRANCO	R-R	.255	.306	.427	1.2
RF MICHAEL SAUNDERS	L-R	.253	.338	.478	1.3
1B TOMMY JOSEPH	R-R	.257	.308	.505	0.5
SS FREDDY GALVIS	S-R	.241	.274	.399	1.3
C CAMERON RUPP	R-R	.252	.303	.447	1.3

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF ANDRÉS BLANCO	S-R	.253	.316	.405	-0.2
OF CHRIS COGHLAN	L-R	.188	.290	.318	-0.6
OF AARON ALTHERR	R-R	.197	.300	.288	-0.2

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH JEREMY HELLICKSON	12-10	3.71	7.3	3.0
RH CLAY BUCHHOLZ	8-10	4.78	6.0	0.2
RH AARON NOLA	6-9	4.78	9.8	0.0
RH JERAD EICKHOFF	11-14	3.65	7.6	3.5
RH VINCE VELASQUEZ	8-6	4.12	10.4	1.9

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH JEANMAR GÓMEZ	37	4.85	6.2	-0.2
RH JOAQUÍN BENOIT	1	2.81	9.8	1.0

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

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MODEST PROPOSAL

The Phillies brought in veteran infielders-turned-almost-outfielders Howie Kendrick and Chris Coghlan to bolster the corners beside Odubel Herrera. Their future rightfielder, though, was already in house. Converted shortstop **Roman Quinn** brings leadoff skills (.353 career OBP and 159 steals in the minors) and a rightfielder's arm. Health is the major concern; a slew of injuries have kept Quinn from playing a full season in any of his five pro years. But with Philadelphia bringing along a number of young starters who give up fly balls, there is every reason to maximize outfield defense. Quinn does that better than Kendrick or Coghlan.

BOTTOM LINE | The club is trending upward toward .500 this season, with better days ahead.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP PHILADELPHIA

OVERALL RANK 12

I see a good energy with this group of kids. They're going to move toward .500 and continue growing. . . . **Maikel Franco** has incredible raw power. He needs to stop getting himself out. Pitchers get him to chase balls out of the zone. . . . **Freddy Galvis** is a solid defender, but when you're taking the same swing 1–2 that you're taking 3–1, you're going to make outs. . . . **Odubel Herrera** is a very, very solid hitter. He has speed, he's got some power, he can steal some bases. . . . **Howie Kendrick** should have an impact, a veteran who's willing to take some pitches. . . . I see a lot of holes in **Aaron Altherr**'s swing. He's vulnerable to breaking balls. . . . I love **Roman Quinn**. He's one of my favorite guys. His makeup is off the charts, his strength, his athleticism. The sky is the limit. . . . [Shortstop prospect] **J.P. Crawford** needs to stop reading about how good he is and start working to show everyone how good he is. He has to become more disciplined. . . . **Aaron Nola**'s got a well-above-average curveball. His fastball is average, but he has tremendous feel for making a big pitch when he needs to. . . . **Jerad Eickhoff** is one of the more underrated pitchers in the game. . . . It's nice to know you've got that veteran guy—**Jeremy Hellickson**—who's going to get into the seventh inning. . . . **Clay Buchholz** is going to win 11 or 12 games. He lets **Jake Thompson** go to Triple A and figure stuff out. . . . **Jeanmar Gómez** has just average stuff. He would be better off in the seventh or eighth inning, and let **Joaquín Benoit** take over the closer's role.

MITCHELL LAYTON/GETTY IMAGES (HERRERA); ELSA/GETTY IMAGES (QUINN)

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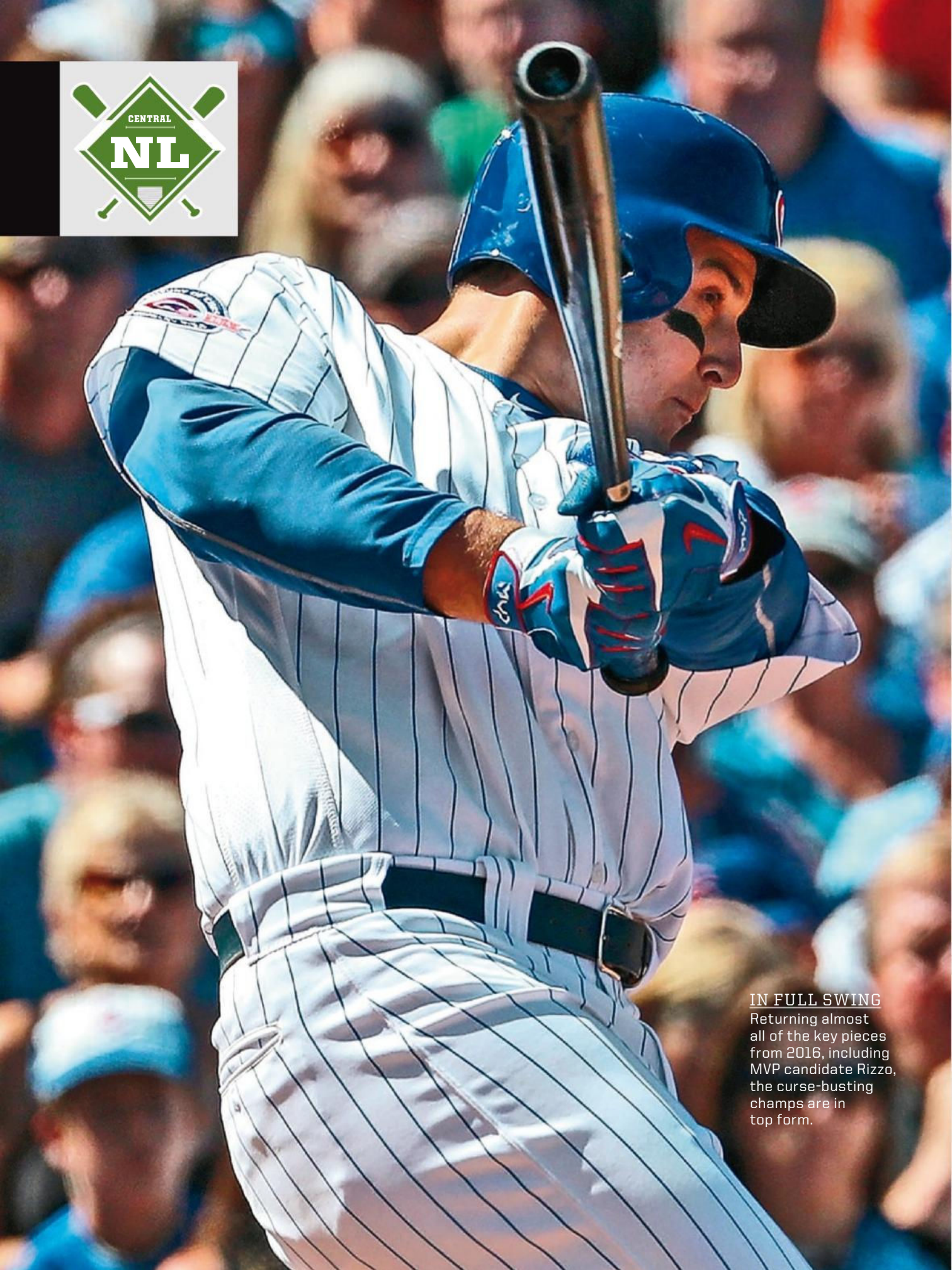

IN FULL SWING
Returning almost all of the key pieces from 2016, including MVP candidate Rizzo, the curse-busting champs are in top form.

CUBS

MANAGER JOE MADDON
3RD SEASON WITH CHICAGO

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
LF KYLE SCHWARBER	L-R	.246	.355	.487	1.2*
3B KRIS BRYANT	R-R	.292	.385	.554	7.7
1B ANTHONY RIZZO	L-L	.292	.385	.544	5.7
2B BEN ZOBRIST	S-R	.272	.386	.446	3.8
SS ADDISON RUSSELL	R-R	.238	.321	.417	4.3
RF JASON HEYWARD	L-L	.230	.306	.325	1.5
C WILLSON CONTRERAS	R-R	.282	.357	.488	1.8
CF ALBERT ALMORA JR. (R)	R-R	.277	.308	.455	0.7

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF JAVIER BÁEZ	R-R	.273	.314	.423	3.4
OF JON JAY	L-L	.291	.339	.389	1.1
C MIGUEL MONTERO	L-R	.216	.327	.357	-0.3

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH JON LESTER	19-5	2.44	8.7	5.3
RH JAKE ARRIETA	18-8	3.10	8.7	3.4
RH KYLE HENDRICKS	16-8	2.13	8.1	5.0
RH JOHN LACKEY	11-8	3.35	8.6	2.5
LH MIKE MONTGOMERY	4-5	2.52	8.3	2.0

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH WADE DAVIS	27	1.87	9.8	1.8
RH HÉCTOR RONDON	18	3.53	10.2	0.4

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS
*2015 STATS

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MODEST PROPOSAL

Last year's championship owed as much to the Cubs' elite defense—which turned nearly three of every four balls in play into outs—as anything else. The return of converted catcher Kyle Schwarber to left and the loss of Dexter Fowler in center are reasons for concern in 2017. One way to bolster the defense is to play **Albert Almora Jr.** every day in centerfield. An excellent defender, Almora is projected to share time with Jon Jay and perhaps Jason Heyward. Playing Almora regularly would protect Schwarber and allow the 22-year-old Almora's bat to develop. Jay is a better fit for fourth outfielder.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP CHICAGO

OVERALL RANK 1

I don't think they'll get to 103 wins again. They're still very good, but the pitching went perfectly last year. They had five guys make 29 starts. That never happens, especially with guys in their 30s like **Jon Lester**, **Jake Arrieta** and **John Lackey**. . . . I think they might go with six starters, at least for some stretches, with **Mike Montgomery** and **Brett Anderson** at No. 5 and 6. It's not a bad idea. . . . I don't think **Kyle Hendricks** was a fluke. He's a Greg Maddux type, command and control. His margin for error isn't much because he doesn't have power, but everyone else has power in this day and age, so he gives a really different look. . . . **Wade Davis** wasn't real sharp at the end of last year, even before he went on the DL. This spring he's been O.K., but his cutter isn't as electric as it used to be. . . . I heard a lot about **Jason Heyward**'s adjusted approach this spring, lowering his hands, but I haven't seen any results yet. . . . It's natural to think **Kris Bryant** will come back to earth, but, boy oh boy, he won MVP during what was supposed to be his sophomore slump. I don't think you'll see a falloff. He's more patient, drives the ball the other way. Shoot, he has it all. . . . To have the kind of at bats **Kyle Schwarber** had in the World Series after missing almost the full season—lots of guys have bat speed and power, but he was locked in right away. He could hit .300 with 30 home runs. . . . **Javier Báez** is a smart player. On a soft line drive, he won't catch it, on purpose, so he can get a double play. That suggests he'll continue to improve in other areas, like plate discipline.

BOTTOM LINE | Their pitching could take a small step back, but the Cubs are still the team to beat in the Central.

JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES (RIZZO); JOHN CORDES/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (LESTER); JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (ALMORA)

CARDINALS

MANAGER MIKE MATHENY
6TH SEASON WITH ST. LOUIS

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF	DEXTER FOWLER	S-R	.276	.393	.447	4.2
SS	ALEDMYS DÍAZ	R-R	.300	.369	.510	3.5
1B	MATT CARPENTER	L-R	.271	.380	.505	3.4
RF	STEPHEN PISCOTTY	R-R	.273	.343	.457	2.9
C	YADIER MOLINA	R-R	.307	.360	.427	2.9
3B	JHONNY PERALTA	R-R	.260	.307	.408	-0.4
2B	KOLTEN WONG	L-R	.240	.327	.355	1.5
LF	RANDAL GRICHUK	R-R	.240	.289	.480	2.7

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF	JEDD GYORKO	R-R	.243	.306	.495	2.9
1B	MATT ADAMS	L-R	.249	.309	.471	0.7
OF	TOMMY PHAM	R-R	.226	.324	.440	-0.1

		W	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	CARLOS MARTÍNEZ	16-9	3.04	8.0	5.4
RH	ADAM WAINWRIGHT	13-9	4.62	7.3	1.0
RH	MIKE LEAKE	9-12	4.69	6.4	0.5
RH	MICHAEL WACHA	7-7	5.09	7.4.	-0.4
RH	LANCE LYNN	12-11	3.03	8.8	3.5*

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	SEUNG-HWAN OH	19	1.92	11.6	2.8
LH	KEVIN SIEGRIST	3	2.77	9.6	1.7

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MODEST PROPOSAL

Injuries allowed Aledmys Díaz to emerge as an All-Star shortstop last year. With everyone healthy now, though, there's pressure for playing time. The Cards have chosen to move Matt Carpenter to first base, but a better idea would be to leave him at third so **Matt Adams** can take most of the time at first. Shuffling Carpenter to allow a declining Jhonny Peralta (.260/.307/.408 in 2016 at age 34, with bad defense) to keep a job is playing the contract rather than the player. Adams, who has battled various injuries the last two years, can still rake and is just 28.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP ST. LOUIS

OVERALL RANK 6

It felt weird with the Cardinals not playing in October. This will be one of those years when St. Louis finds a way to hang in there and keeps chugging along—they'll get in as a wild card. . . . Last year's team was so sloppy on defense. **Dexter Fowler** will change that. He's a perfect fit, and he gives them better baserunning. . . . **Randal Grichuk** was never meant to be a centerfielder. Now he goes to a corner, and he'll be an asset. He's a big strikeout guy, but he punishes mistakes. . . . **Matt Adams** dropped a ton of weight, and now everyone thinks he's going to hit 30 home runs. Calm down. He needs to learn to take more walks. . . . **Aledmys Díaz** was a revelation as a rookie. As the guy they hope will hit second, he's a key–and a big wild card. I'd temper my expectations, now that the league has seen him. . . . **Kolten Wong** is a mystery. A hyped prospect, the game sped up on him, and he wasn't able to catch up, and they tried him as an outfielder, which was a mistake. He belongs at second. They just need to show they have confidence in him. . . . **Seung-hwan Oh** is very deceptive in his delivery. You'd think hitters might catch on. But he's got legitimately nasty stuff. This guy is for real. . . . Losing **Alex Reyes** was a big hit, but I still like this rotation. **Carlos Martínez** is an ace. . . . **Michael Wacha** set the world on fire in the 2013 postseason and never recovered from that run. It's come back to haunt them. I think this is the year he gets fully healthy. . . . **Adam Wainwright** had his least productive year, but he was still coming back from an Achilles injury. He's not the ace he was before, but his intelligence and aptitude will still take him a long way.

BOTTOM LINE | This team can't catch the Cubs, but a wild-card spot should be in the Cards.

OTTO GREULE JR/GETTY IMAGES (MARTINEZ); MATTHEW STOCKMAN/GETTY IMAGES (ADAMS)

PIRATES

MANAGER CLINT HURDLE
7TH SEASON WITH PITTSBURGH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
2B	JOSH HARRISON	R-R	.283	.311	.388	1.8
1B	JOSH BELL (R)	S-R	.273	.368	.406	-0.5
RF	ANDREW MCCUTCHEN	R-R	.256	.336	.430	-0.7
CF	STARLING MARTÉ	R-R	.311	.362	.456	4.9
LF	GREGORY POLANCO	L-L	.258	.323	.463	1.6
3B	DAVID FREESE	R-R	.270	.352	.412	1.8
C	FRANCISCO CERVELLI	R-R	.264	.377	.322	1.6
SS	JORDY MERCER	R-R	.256	.328	.374	0.9

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF	JOHN JASO	L-R	.268	.353	.413	0.9
UT	PHIL GOSSELIN	R-R	.277	.324	.368	0.3
OF	ADAM FRAZIER	L-R	.301	.356	.411	0.5

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	GERRIT COLE	7-10	3.88	7.6	1.9
RH	JAMESON TAILLON	5-4	3.38	7.4	2.3
RH	IVÁN NOVA	12-8	4.17	7.1	1.9
RH	CHAD KUHL	5-4	4.20	6.8	0.9
RH	DREW HUTCHISON	13-5	5.57	7.7	-1.7*

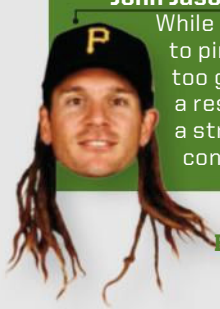
		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH	TONY WATSON	15	3.06	7.7	1.4
RH	DANIEL HUDSON	5	5.22	8.7	-0.6

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS
*2015 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Power-hitting **Josh Bell** is ready for the majors, which makes incumbent first baseman **John Jaso** an excess piece. While having Jaso around to pinch-hit helps, he's too good a hitter to be a reserve. Pittsburgh, a strong wild-card contender with an unstable rotation, should look to move Jaso, his .359 career OBP and his $4 million salary to an AL team for a starting pitcher. The Mariners and the Angels could use the OBP boost, but it's the Rays who have the need, the open lineup spot and the extra pitcher—righty Matt Andriese. A one-for-one trade would improve both teams.



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP PITTSBURGH

OVERALL RANK 7

There's a good chance they're the third club in the division. If they're a playoff team, they're on the outer edge. . . . The rotation is pretty iffy. They're counting on **Gerrit Cole** to be the ace. I don't know if he is. When he had Russell Martin behind the plate, he was very good. Martin's gone, and I don't think Cole connects well with **Francisco Cervelli**. . . . The starter who has stood out is **Tyler Glasnow**. He has the best stuff on the staff; this spring he's been as good an arm as there is in Florida. The question is, Can he throw enough strikes? . . . **Chad Kuhl** will be in the rotation somewhere. His stuff's not great, but he knows what he's doing. . . . **Iván Nova**'s in a battle for the five hole, but he may be better than that. . . . This is a very solid defensive club in the outfield—**Gregory Polanco**, **Starling Marte**. **Andrew McCutchen** has played well in rightfield. He's swung the bat better. Getting him out of center is a good move, but he is getting old. He's just not a premier outfielder like he was. . . . They're going to need **Josh Bell**, because you're not going to October with **John Jaso** as your first baseman. But Bell had left-knee surgery and hasn't been out there this spring. . . . Somebody else is going to have to get in there offensively other than the outfielders. **David Freese** is solid. **Jordy Mercer** is an average starting shortstop on a decent team, but he's no All-Star. . . . **Juan Nicasio** is a key figure. If he has to go in the rotation, he can. If he's a reliever, he can give you multiple innings. . . . The bullpen is pretty good. **Tony Watson** hasn't been sharp, but I'm not worried. **Daniel Hudson**'s a solid setup guy.

BOTTOM LINE | Pittsburgh has had a great run, but the Cards have improved and the Bucs haven't.

JOE SARGENT/GETTY IMAGES (POLANCO); MIKE CARLSON/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (JASO)

BREWERS

MANAGER CRAIG COUNSELL
3RD SEASON WITH MILWAUKEE

B-T		BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
2B S-R	JONATHAN VILLAR	.285	.369	.457	3.9
CF R-R	KEON BROXTON	.242	.354	.430	2.1
LF R-R	RYAN BRAUN	.305	.365	.538	4.4
1B L-R	**ERIC THAMES**	.317	.425	.676	--*
RF R-R	DOMINGO SANTANA	.256	.345	.447	-0.2
3B L-R	**TRAVIS SHAW**	.242	.306	.421	2.2
SS R-R	ORLANDO ARCIA	.219	.273	.358	-0.2
C R-R	ANDREW SUSAC	.218	.297	.368	0.1†

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS
*S. KOREA STATS
†2015 STATS

BENCH

B-T		BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C R-R	**JETT BANDY**	.234	.281	.392	1.0
2B L-R	SCOOTER GENNETT	.263	.317	.412	0.9
OF R-R	HERNÁN PÉREZ	.272	.302	.428	2.0

		W	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	JUNIOR GUERRA	9-3	2.81	7.4	4.0
RH	MATT GARZA	6-8	4.51	6.2	-0.3
RH	ZACH DAVIES	11-7	3.97	7.4	2.3
RH	CHASE ANDERSON	9-11	4.39	7.1	1.0
RH	WILY PERALTA	7-11	4.86	6.6	0.6

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	**NEFTALI FELIZ**	2	3.52	10.2	1.0
RH	CARLOS TORRES	2	2.73	8.5	2.2

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

The quirkiest move of the off-season was the Brewers' decision to bring **Eric Thames** *(page 68)* in from South Korea, install him as their first baseman and give him a three-year contract—dumping NL home run leader Chris Carter in the process. Thames did hit 124 homers in three seasons in Korea, but that's a hitters' league with a level of play roughly comparable to A ball or Double A in the U.S. With a number of young hitters on their way to the majors, the Brewers should give Thames a short leash and move Ryan Braun to first base, creating space in left for top prospects **Lewis Brinson** and **Brett Phillips**.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP MILWAUKEE

OVERALL RANK 13

They're trying to rebuild, but it's gonna take some time. . . . They could eventually be as good as any club at short and second. Last year could prove to be **Jonathan Villar**'s best, but he may still put up All-Star numbers. Terrance Gore and Billy Hamilton are probably the two fastest guys in baseball, but Villar could be third. . . . **Orlando Arcia** could break out at shortstop. He's got tools—could be a younger Alcides Escobar, maybe even a little better offensively. . . . **Ryan Braun**'s the same: .300, 25 or 30 home runs. They'd love to trade him, just haven't been able to unload the contract. . . . They gave **Eric Thames** $16 million to come back from Korea, where he had some historic seasons. But Korea's not the big leagues. I see a guy who is fooled by off-speed stuff and gets beat inside by a plus fastball. . . . Up the middle they've got some athletes, no doubt, but this is one of the worst staffs in baseball. **Junior Guerra**, their No. 1, is probably a 5 on a lot of clubs. Is he built for long-term success, now that he's matching up against aces? . . . **Neftali Feliz** is a shell of what he once was, before he hurt his elbow. His velocity jumped last year a bit, but you want him pitching more in the seventh and eighth. . . . The Brewers' system? They've stocked. It. Up. **Corey Ray** has a chance to be a Denard Span type. I like **Lewis Brinson**, who they got from the Rangers—a Lorenzo Cain type. **Josh Hader**'s got power stuff, power breaking ball, a lefty. He could be the best pitcher on the big league team by the end of the season. . . . They're not gonna lose 110, but it's going to be a tough year. Lots of positives here for the future, though.

BOTTOM LINE | An undermanned rotation will lag behind a solid lineup for now, but something's brewing in Milwaukee.

RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES (VILLAR); ROBERT BINDER/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (BRINSON)

REDS

MANAGER BRYAN PRICE
4TH SEASON WITH CINCINNATI

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF BILLY HAMILTON	S-R	.260	.321	.343	2.8
2B JOSÉ PERAZA	R-R	.324	.352	.411	-0.1
1B JOEY VOTTO	L-R	.326	.434	.550	4.0
LF ADAM DUVALL	R-R	.241	.297	.498	3.2
RF SCOTT SCHEBLER	L-R	.265	.330	.432	0.5
SS ZACK COZART	R-R	.252	.308	.425	2.0
3B EUGENIO SUAREZ	R-R	.248	.317	.411	1.5
C DEVIN MESORACO	R-R	.273	.359	.534	4.8*

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C TUCKER BARNHART	S-R	.257	.323	.379	0.7
UT ARISMENDY ALCÁNTARA	S-R	.205	.254	.367	0.6*
OF RYAN RABURN	R-R	.220	.309	.404	-0.6

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH BRANDON FINNEGAN	10-11	3.98	7.6	2.3
RH ROBERT STEPHENSON (R)	8-9	4.41	7.5	--†
RH SCOTT FELDMAN	5-5	3.90	5.1	1.4**
LH CODY REED	6-4	3.08	8.0	--†
RH TIM ADLEMAN	4-4	4.00	6.1	1.3

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH RAISEL IGLESIAS	6	2.53	9.5	2.7
RH DREW STOREN	3	5.23	8.4	-0.3

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS *2014 STATS
†2015 STATS **MINOR LEAGUE STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Two of the best relievers in Bryan Price's bullpen were starters as recently as 2014, in **Tony Cingrani**'s case, and '16 for **Raisel Iglesias**. Price should leverage their endurance to manage his bullpen—one of the worst ever in 2016. Instead of forcing the two into the modern one-inning-at-a-time model, let them work multiple frames per outing, if perhaps less often. Iglesias was used this way for a while last season, averaging 1⅔ innings per appearance, to great success, but Cincinnati could go even further. Getting more from its best relievers is one way to squeeze value from a thin staff.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP CINCINNATI

OVERALL RANK 14

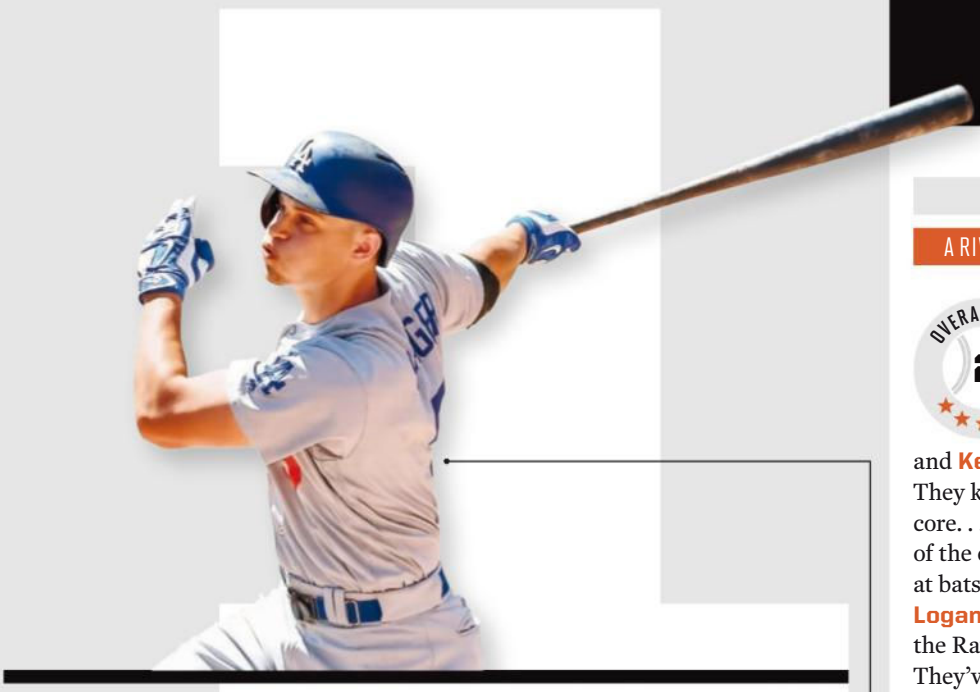
Their starting pitching is really going to be a problem. . . . I'm concerned whether **Brandon Finnegan** can throw enough strikes. But he's got a very good breaking ball and enough velocity on his fastball. I think he's legitimate. . . . **Robert Stephenson** hasn't made the progress I thought he would. He doesn't have great deception, though he does have decent velocity. Again, it's a matter of throwing strikes. . . . **Raisel Iglesias** should be a star. His velocity kicks up a lot when he's in relief. . . . It's a shame **Devin Mesoraco** can't stay on the field, because he has the tools to be an All-Star. He's a 30 home-run guy, especially in their park. . . . **Joey Votto**'s an outstanding hitter. He doesn't strike out, he uses the whole field, he commands the strike zone, and he never chases bad balls. I'm sure they'd like to get rid of his salary, but he's their only real threat. . . . **José Peraza** has absolutely no power. You worry that it will be hard for him to reach base consistently. But he's able to steal some bases. . . . **Zack Cozart** doesn't wow you with his tools, but he gets hits when you need them. When the ball is hit to him, it's an out. He's a solid, steadying, winning player. . . . Last year was the first time **Adam Duvall** got to play every day, and it paid off. He's got a short powerful swing, and he's quick to the ball. . . . It gets overlooked, but **Billy Hamilton** can really field. He gets good, accurate jumps, and he's fearless against the fence. If he gets on base around 33% of the time, he could steal 100 bases. His next step is to cut down on the swings and misses.

BOTTOM LINE | With a weak rotation and little protection for Joey Votto, another last-place finish lies ahead.

RICH KANE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MESORACO); ROBERT BINDER/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (IGLESIAS)

WEST
NL

FEATS OF CLAY
This may be the year that Kershaw, the best pitcher in baseball, finally finds himself on the best team in baseball.



DODGERS

MANAGER DAVE ROBERTS
2ND SEASON WITH LOS ANGELES

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
2B LOGAN FORSYTHE	R-R	.264	.333	.444	3.4
SS COREY SEAGER	L-R	.308	.365	.512	6.1
3B JUSTIN TURNER	R-R	.275	.339	.493	4.9
1B ADRIÁN GONZÁLEZ	L-L	.285	.349	.435	2.1
C YASMANI GRANDAL	S-R	.228	.339	.477	2.8
CF JOC PEDERSON	L-L	.246	.352	.495	3.4
RF YASIEL PUIG	R-R	.263	.323	.416	1.4
LF ANDREW TOLES	L-R	.314	.365	.505	1.4

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF CHASE UTLEY	L-R	.252	.319	.396	2.0
OF FRANKLIN GUTIÉRREZ	R-R	.246	.329	.452	0.3
OF ANDRE ETHIER	L-L	.208	.269	.375	-0.2

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH CLAYTON KERSHAW	12-4	1.69	10.4	5.6
LH RICH HILL	12-5	2.12	10.5	4.0
RH KENTA MAEDA	16-11	3.48	9.2	2.4
LH JULIO URÍAS	5-2	3.39	9.8	1.0
RH BRANDON MCCARTHY	2-3	4.95	9.9	-0.2

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH KENLEY JANSEN	47	1.83	13.6	2.5
RH PEDRO BÁEZ	0	3.04	10.1	0.9

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

If there was a lesson the Dodgers could learn from last season, it's that turning important jobs over to homegrown talent is a winning strategy. Corey Seager nearly won the NL MVP Award as a rookie, while Julio Urías had a 3.39 ERA in 77 innings after making his debut at 19 in May. The 2017 team can do the same; **Cody Bellinger** and **Alex Verdugo** are two of the top hitting prospects in the game, and both could be ready for major league jobs this summer. Bumping Yasiel Puig and Andre Ethier for budding stars could elevate the offense—and possibly make L.A. the best team in baseball.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP LOS ANGELES

OVERALL RANK 2

The Cubs have the belt, but here we're looking at the No. 1 contender. It was key that **Justin Turner** and **Kenley Jansen** re-signed. They keep the main part of a great core. . . . Turner's the heart and soul of the club, hits in the clutch, quality at bats, good defender at third. . . . **Logan Forsythe**, who they got from the Rays, is another throwback type. They've got a ton of smart guys in the front office, but they're not just numbers guys. They understand the impact of character. . . . **Corey Seager** actually might regress as a sophomore. If he doesn't, it would be amazing. I think he's a Hall of Fame player. He can do everything. . . . **Yasiel Puig** is still a frustrating player to watch. So inconsistent. Then he hits a ball to the right center gap and glides in for a stand-up triple. . . . **Andrew Toles** plays really well in spurts, but I think they'd like to upgrade in left. The answer, sooner or later, could be **Cody Bellinger**, who is one of the best hitting prospects in the game. He can hit .300 with 25- or 30-homer potential. . . . **Joc Pederson** has too many swings and misses. He can drive the ball out to any part of the park but is not consistent enough to be that middle-of-the-lineup guy. . . . **Julio Urías** has all the attributes to be a No. 1 starter. He's just 20, but he's already got that natural feel for a changeup that's as good as his breaking ball. . . . Of course, he's not going to be the No. 1 in L.A. for a long time, if ever, with **Clayton Kershaw** around. It's scary they played so well when he was hurt last year. That's the kind of depth $250 million can get you. They're the Yankees of the Steinbrenner era.

BOTTOM LINE | The Cubs have the rings, but in 2017 the Dodgers are the deepest team in the league.

PATRICK MCDERMOTT/WASHINGTON NATIONALS/GETTY IMAGES (KERSHAW); JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES (SEAGER); RON VESELY/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (VERDUGO)

GIANTS

MANAGER BRUCE BOCHY
11TH SEASON WITH SAN FRANCISCO

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF DENARD SPAN	L-L	.266	.331	.381	1.0
1B BRANDON BELT	L-L	.275	.394	.474	4.3
C BUSTER POSEY	R-R	.288	.362	.434	4.7
RF HUNTER PENCE	R-R	.289	.357	.451	1.9
SS BRANDON CRAWFORD	L-R	.275	.342	.430	4.5
3B EDUARDO NÚÑEZ	R-R	.288	.325	.432	2.3
2B JOE PANIK	L-R	.239	.315	.379	1.1
LF JARRETT PARKER	L-L	.236	.358	.394	0.2

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
IF CONOR GILLASPIE	L-R	.262	.307	.440	1.1
IF JAE-GYUN HWANG (R)	R-R	.330	.391	.558	--*
OF MAC WILLIAMSON	R-R	.223	.315	.411	0.4

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH MADISON BUMGARNER	15-9	2.74	10.0.	5.0
RH JOHNNY CUETO	18-5	2.79	8.1	5.6
RH JEFF SAMARDZIJA	12-11	3.81	7.4	2.7
LH MATT MOORE	13-12	4.08	8.1	2.1
RH MATT CAIN	4-8	5.64	7.3	-0.7

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH MARK MELANCON	47	1.64	8.2	1.1
RH HUNTER STRICKLAND	3	3.10	8.4	1.1

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS
*S. KOREA STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

BeliEVEN is dead, but the hopes of the Giants' home-grown core, which returns intact for another run, are not. A strong lineup could be undercut, however, by a leftfield platoon of Jarrett Parker and Mac Williamson. Both project as replacement-level players, and San Francisco needs more. The future is now at AT&T Park, so dealing a top prospect like pitcher **Tyler Beede** to fill the hole (say, with the Tigers' J.D. Martinez or the Brewers' Ryan Braun) would be justified. A trade like that could add three crucial wins to a team within striking distance of the Dodgers.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP SAN FRANCISCO

OVERALL RANK 5

The one thing the team can't afford is an injury in the outfield. **Denard Span** is a little long in the tooth, and **Hunter Pence** has been having a hard time staying healthy, though he used to be an iron man. If he gets hurt, they have issues. . . . They have one of the best double-play combinations in the league in **Joe Panik** and **Brandon Crawford**. . . . **Brandon Belt** is going to have to step up his game. This is a guy they gave $79 million based on what they expected him to do in the future—well, the future is now. . . . If Belt gets off to a slow start, don't be surprised if **Buster Posey** gets a little more time at first. The catching position is such a difficult spot to find a real two-way guy like Posey, and that's why they don't want to move him, but you look at Joe Mauer and can't help but think if they'd moved him to first sooner, it might have extended his career. Posey is one of the best players in the league. . . . **Eduardo Núñez** is at third, but knocking on the door is **Christian Arroyo**. That guy can really swing the bat. . . . **Madison Bumgarner**, my gosh, the dude is a horse. There's probably 10 true aces in baseball, and he's definitely one of them. . . . I love **Johnny Cueto**. He's not gonna light up the radar gun but he disrupts rhythm, keeps guys off balance, throws anything for strikes anytime. Everyone gets so excited about the 95- to 97-mph fastballs, but you see those guys today and you don't see them tomorrow because they huff and they puff and they blow their arms out. Guys like Cueto can pitch forever. . . . I'm looking for a big year from **Jeff Samardzija**. . . . With **Matt Moore** you have a nice quartet of starters.

JUSTIN K. ALLER/GETTY IMAGES (POSEY); ALEX TRAUTWIG/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (BEEDE)

BOTTOM LINE | The Giants can expect to win a lot of games this year—just not as many as their rivals to the south.

ROCKIES

MANAGER BUD BLACK
1ST SEASON WITH COLORADO

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF	CHARLIE BLACKMON	L-L	.324	.381	.552	4.4
2B	DJ LEMAHIEU	R-R	.348	.416	.495	5.2
3B	NOLAN ARENADO	R-R	.294	.362	.570	6.5
RF	CARLOS GONZÁLEZ	L-L	.298	.350	.505	2.2
1B	IAN DESMOND	R-R	.285	.335	.446	2.7
LF	GERARDO PARRA	L-L	.253	.271	.399	-2.8
SS	TREVOR STORY	R-R	.272	.341	.567	3.1
C	TONY WOLTERS	L-R	.259	.327	.395	1.0

BENCH

		B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C	TOM MURPHY (R)	R-R	.327	.361	.647	--*
IF	MARK REYNOLDS	R-R	.282	.356	.450	1.5
UT	ALEXI AMARISTA	L-R	.257	.295	.271	-0.6

		W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	JON GRAY	10-10	4.61	9.9	2.3
LH	TYLER ANDERSON	5-6	3.54	7.8	3.5
RH	TYLER CHATWOOD	12-9	3.87	6.7	3.5
RH	JEFF HOFFMAN (R)	6-9	4.02	9.4	--*
RH	GERMÁN MÁRQUEZ (R)	11-6	3.13	8.4	--*

		SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH	GREG HOLLAND	32	3.83	9.9	0.2†
RH	ADAM OTTAVINO	7	2.67	11.7	1.0

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS
*MINOR LEAGUE STATS †2015 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

Injuries have eroded the Rockies' optimism this spring. Ian Desmond will miss at least a month with a broken left hand after he was hit by a pitch. Catcher Tom Murphy broke his right forearm and is out until May. Outfielder David Dahl, who raked as a rookie last year, has a rib injury that could cause him to miss Opening Day. It's time to reassess the plan for 2017. Rather than push for a wild-card slot, Colorado can take this chance to shop **Carlos González** and **Charlie Blackmon** again, in an effort to add to what could be one of the game's best homegrown corps in '18 and '19.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP COLORADO

OVERALL RANK 8

You can put this offense up against any in the league. It's going to be dangerous. . . . When he gets back [from a broken hand], **Ian Desmond** will bring out-of-the-box thinking, a different dynamic to the team. . . . **Nolan Arenado** is as good as there is. The plays he makes on defense, I haven't seen in 30 years. He's continuing to grow offensively, too. He's got a way better two-strike approach than when he came into the league. . . . **Trevor Story** has a loud barrel. The power is always going to show up, but there are consistency issues. If you look in the minors, you see the history with strikeouts and errors. . . . **DJ LeMahieu** can manipulate the bat well. You could almost put an opposite shift on him. He has the ability to shoot the ball past first. With fastballs, he's content to get his hits to the opposite field. He's also underrated defensively. . . . **Jon Gray** is close. He has two top-of-the-scale pitches in his fastball and slider. He was electric at times down the stretch. That 16-strikeout game against the Padres last September was huge. He can grow into an ace. . . . I saw **Tyler Chatwood** throw at 91, 93. His secondary stuff isn't overwhelming, but he's got guts. . . . **Jeff Hoffman** can grow into a No. 2 type. He'll start, though, as the No. 4 or 5. . . . **Antonio Senzatela** is at 94–97, with a power breaking ball. He's pushing Hoffman and **Germán Márquez**. He was a rising star last year. Now he's a known name. . . . **Adam Ottavino** has looked good. He has nasty deception from a low slot. He could close for them. . . . This team has a chance to make things interesting. It'll probably finish third in the division.

BOTTOM LINE | Despite some dispiriting injuries, the team's potent offense could pave the Rockies' road.

JORDAN NAHOLOWA'A MURPH (GRAY); RIC TAPIA/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (GONZALEZ)

DIAMONDBACKS

MANAGER TOREY LOVULLO
1ST SEASON WITH ARIZONA

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
CF A.J. POLLOCK	R-R	.315	.367	.498	7.4*
3B JAKE LAMB	L-R	.249	.332	.509	2.6
1B PAUL GOLDSCHMIDT	R-R	.297	.411	.489	4.8
RF DAVID PERALTA	L-L	.251	.295	.433	0.6
LF YASMANY TOMÁS	R-R	.272	.313	.508	-0.4
2B BRANDON DRURY	R-R	.282	.329	.458	0.0
SS CHRIS OWINGS	R-R	.277	.315	.416	1.6
C CHRIS IANNETTA	R-R	.210	.303	.329	0.3

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
C JEFF MATHIS	R-R	.238	.267	.333	0.4
SS NICK AHMED	R-R	.218	.265	.299	0.2
OF JEREMY HAZELBAKER	L-R	.235	.295	.480	0.2

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH ZACK GREINKE	13-7	4.37	7.6	2.3
RH TAIJUAN WALKER	8-11	4.22	8.0	0.4
RH SHELBY MILLER	3-12	6.15	6.2	-0.7
LH ROBBIE RAY	8-15	4.90	11.3	0.7
LH PATRICK CORBIN	5-13	5.15	7.6	-0.9

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH FERNANDO RODNEY	25	3.44	10.2	1.0
RH JAKE BARRETT	4	3.49	8.5	1.0

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS
*2015 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

It's rarely a good sign to see that your team has signed Fernando Rodney; and when Kevin Jepsen joins him on the roster, it usually means you have bullpen issues. Rather than mess around with veteran retreads, the Snakes should pull from their farm. Lefty **Anthony Banda** had a 2.88 ERA and a 24% strikeout rate at two levels last year. Also, they might as well see if **Archie Bradley**, who has never panned out as a starter, has the stuff for one inning at a time. Rule 5 pick **Tyler Jones** was dominant at Double A Trenton last year. The bullpen is the team's weak link, but there is enough raw material to turn it into a strength.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP ARIZONA

OVERALL RANK 9

There seems to be good energy under Torey Lovullo. . . . I expect **Zack Greinke** to continue to be a mainstay in the rotation. . . . **Shelby Miller** has been filthy, up to 99 mph, with a nasty slider. His mechanics got away from him last year. . . . **Taijuan Walker** has huge stuff, but he's been searching in his delivery. I think he'll help, but is he a front-of-the-rotation guy? No. . . . **Patrick Corbin**'s stuff doesn't seem quite as crisp. He's a fringy command guy, so he's had to learn to be more creative. . . . The time is now for **Archie Bradley**. He doesn't have the stuff he had when he came out of high school. He's throwing a two-seamer more, which is helping his command. . . . The biggest concern is the bullpen. It's tough to count on **Fernando Rodney**. . . . **Jake Barrett** is nursing a shoulder injury, and he's their setup guy. . . . **Jared Miller** has been surprising. He's a 6' 7" guy with deception. . . . **A.J. Pollock** looks healthy. His timing isn't great. But in BP, the ball is jumping off his bat. . . . **Paul Goldschmidt** has looked good. His power was down last year, but he's the heart and soul of the lineup. He'll be fine. . . . **Brandon Drury** is coming off a big year, and I don't expect him to slow down. . . . Defense could be a problem: **Jake Lamb**'s range is fringy at third; in leftfield **Yasmany Tomás** is adequate at best. . . . [Shortstop] **Ketel Marté** has shown flashes. He's got great actions on defense, but the bat has a ways to go. . . . I'm not sold that this cast of characters is capable of much more than 75 wins. I wouldn't be surprised if at the deadline they started to dismantle things a bit.

BOTTOM LINE | A new skipper brings a breath of fresh air, but not enough to blow past the Dodgers or the Giants.

NORM HALL/GETTY IMAGES (GOLDSCHMIDT); CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES (BRADLEY)

WHAT MAKES A LEGEND?

Brett Favre #4
Nickname "The Gunslinger"
Legendary Quarterback

20	20 NFL Seasons
71,838	71,838 Career Pass Yards, the Most in NFL History
508	508 Career Pass Touchdowns, the 2nd Most in NFL History
297	297 Consecutive Games Started, the Most in NFL History
11	11-Time Pro Bowl Selection
3	3-Time AP Most Valuable Player (1995-1997)
1	1 Super Bowl Championship

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PADRES

MANAGER ANDY GREEN
2ND SEASON WITH SAN DIEGO

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
LF TRAVIS JANKOWSKI	L-R	.245	.332	.313	1.1
CF MANUEL MARGOT (R)	R-R	.292	.337	.401	--*
1B WIL MYERS	R-R	.259	.336	.461	3.2
3B YANGERVIS SOLARTE	S-R	.286	.341	.467	2.2
RF HUNTER RENFROE (R)	R-R	.306	.336	.557	--*
2B RYAN SCHIMPF	L-R	.217	.336	.533	1.8
C AUSTIN HEDGES	R-R	.326	.353	.597	--*
SS LUIS SARDINAS	S-R	.244	.295	.356	-0.1

BENCH

	B-T	BA	OBP	SLG	WAR
UT CHRISTIAN BETHANCOURT	R-R	.228	.265	.368	-0.3
IF CORY SPANGENBERG	L-R	.271	.333	.399	2.1†
OF ALEX DICKERSON	L-L	.257	.333	.455	1.1

	W-L	ERA	K/9	WAR
LH CLAYTON RICHARD	3-4	3.33	4.1	0.4
RH JERED WEAVER	12-12	5.06	5.2	-0.7
RH JHOULYS CHACIN	6-8	4.81	7.4	0.2
LH CHRISTIAN FRIEDRICH	5-12	4.80	7.0	0.5
RH TREVOR CAHILL	4-4	2.74	9.0	0.9

	SV	ERA	K/9	WAR
RH BRANDON MAURER	13	4.52	9.3	-0.1
RH KEVIN QUACKENBUSH	2	3.92	6.3	0.6

NEW ACQUISITION (R) ROOKIE
2016 STATS
*MINOR LEAGUE STATS †2015 STATS

TEAM MVP · DEFENSIVE STAR · INJURY RISK · BARGAIN · RISING · DECLINING

MODEST PROPOSAL

They have assembled their starting rotation with chewing gum and tongue depressors, bringing in Jered Weaver and Jhoulys Chacin to fill out an expansion-team-quality group. The weak rotation makes the Padres a perfect test case for a very modern idea: Most starting pitchers should go through a lineup only twice, because they're likely to get hit hard the third time through. With a deep bullpen, including former starters **Paul Clemens** and **Jarred Cosart**, Andy Green can hook his starter after 18 batters and still have enough pitching to finish a game. With no chance to contend, why not use the season to experiment and learn something?

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP SAN DIEGO

OVERALL RANK 15

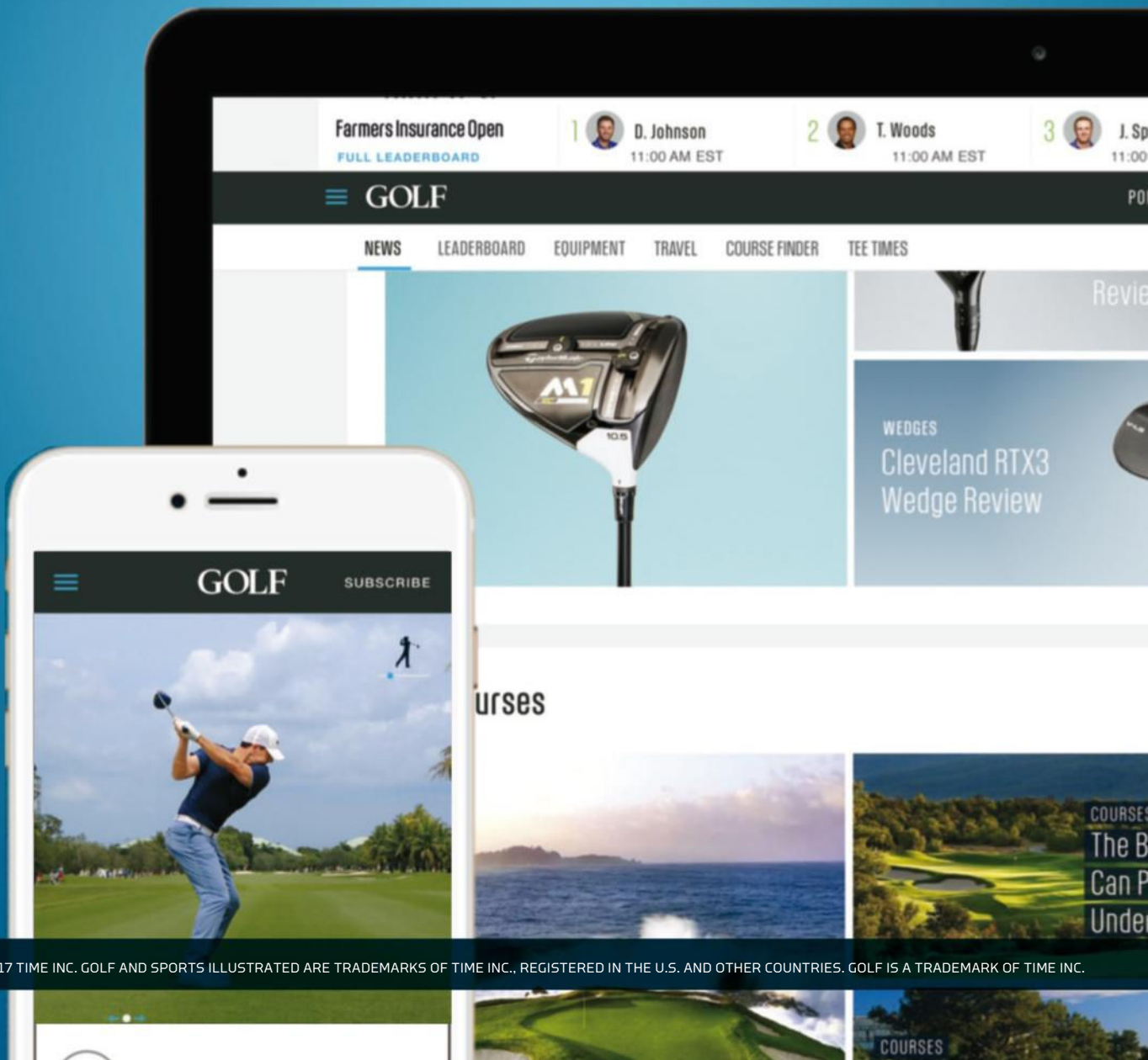
Whoo-eeeee. Well. There's going to be a lot of growing pains. They have a chance to lose 100 games, absolutely. . . . They're gonna build around four core players. **Manuel Margot**, he's a special player, both defensively and offensively, with occasional power. He can be a table setter. . . . **Hunter Renfroe**'s probably got some of the best raw power of any kid coming into the game. People are going to enjoy watching him play rightfield. . . . **Wil Myers** is coming into his own, learning how to play first. When you can swing the bat, they'll find a place for you. . . . **Austin Hedges** is one of the better catch-and-throw guys in the league. This kid is capable of hitting 25 to 30 homers, and I expect him to have a big year. . . . **Clayton Richard** is their best starter, but he fits in the middle of the rotation for any other team. He's not going to blow anybody away. . . . **Jered Weaver**? He was pitching at 84 and 85 mph last year, and he's the No. 2. And **Jhoulys Chacin**? Basically they've got some retreads. . . . I don't like to say this about other teams, but this is probably the worst rotation in baseball. I'd like to put some whipped cream and cherries on it if I could, but I just cannot do it. . . . Look at the bullpen. They've got **Brandon Maurer** as their closer. He may be able to do a decent job, but I don't know how many opportunities he'll get. . . . They've got **Carter Capps** off the scrap heap—a guy who had Tommy John—and they don't know if he's going to be ready. All the others are no-name guys other than **Kevin Quackenbush**. . . . They're even training their backup catcher—**Christian Bethancourt**—to be a pitcher.

ANDY HAYT/SAN DIEGO PADRES/GETTY IMAGES (RENFROE); ROBERT T BINDER/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (COSART)

BOTTOM LINE | Yikes. Some potential stars, but it will get worse before it gets better.

THE ALL-NEW GOLF.com

THE GAME HAS NEVER LOOKED BETTER



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Chi Society

→ BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

FOR DECADES, if you wanted a sure victory in Washington, D.C., you were wise to attach yourself to a loser. The Emil Verban Memorial Society, founded in 1975, was the nation's most elitist Cubs fan club. You might recognize some names on the roster: Ronald Reagan. Hillary Clinton. Dick Cheney. Donald Rumsfeld. Yes, Emil Verban Society members had power when many Cubs outfielders did not.

It started with an idea from lobbyist Bruce Ladd, a Chicago native. Like many lobbyists, Ladd asked what his country could do for him. He realized how many Washington power brokers were baseball fans, so he created the Verban Society, named after an obscure Cubs infielder from the late 1940s.

You could become a Verban Society member only if another member invited you; it was an exclusive club for people who already belong to exclusive clubs. It allowed Washington big shots to pretend they were champions of the downtrodden —a Reggie Jackson Society wouldn't have had the same allure. Whether he realized it or not, Ladd made the dorky kids feel cool by making dorkiness itself cool.

Every member was assigned a number. Syndicated columnist George Will joined early. Songwriter Steve Goodman, a Cubs obsessive who wrote the team's anthem, "Go Cubs Go," was a member. But Ladd got really lucky in 1980, when Reagan, a former Cubs radio announcer, was elected President. Ladd says the Great Communicator "was an enthusiastic Cubs fan," which meant there were a lot of people who were suddenly enthusiastic Cubs fans when they were with Reagan.

Emil Verban was not so enthusiastic—at least not at first. He thought the society was mocking him. Then Ladd invited him and his family to come to Washington from their home in Lincoln, Ill. "They weren't on the ground for an hour and a half, and we had him in the White House," Ladd says. "After that, Verban was the most enthusiastic fan of the Emil Verban Society."

Four years after Reagan left office, Bill Clinton arrived—along with the former Hillary Rodham of Park Ridge, Ill., where she had been a classmate of Goodman's. "Hillary Clinton would have us in [the White House] all the time," Ladd says. "I said, 'Who are your all-time favorite Cub players?' She named six, and we brought them all in."

> The **Emil Verban Society** allowed Washington big shots to pretend they were champions of the downtrodden; a Reggie Jackson Society just wouldn't have the same allure.

Ladd held biennial luncheons for the Society's members, who included three Supreme Court Justices. There, you could talk about Ryno (Cubs second baseman Ryne Sandberg) with Nino (Justice Antonin Scalia) and perhaps tell a member of the Ways and Means Committee of some ways and means to help your company. It paid to be a Cubs fan in our nation's capital long before it paid off in the Second City.

While some people were dying to get into the society, others were dying to get out. Former U.S. commerce secretary William M. Daley, a Chicago native, was inducted against his will—he was a White Sox fan. Former President Barack Obama, another South Sider, had no interest in worshipping at what Goodman called the Cubs' "ivy-covered burial ground." A politician's views on gay marriage might evolve, but a White Sox fan will never come around on the Cubs.

"Obama tried to get out," Ladd says. "I said, 'Your number has been assigned to you.' They said, 'He's a Sox fan.' I said, 'I don't care. Tell him he has to live with it.' I had nothing to lose."

I would like to tell you that the Verban Society held a special meeting on Nov. 2, when the Cubs won the World Series—six days before Washington itself let in a new member from New York City. But the truth is that Ladd disbanded the club in 2005, for a simple reason: He no longer needed it.

Ladd retired in 1998 and now lives in Chapel Hill, N.C. He did watch Game 7 of the World Series, and he was happy for his favorite team. But there was no sense that the Verban Society's spiritual business was finally finished; Ladd wasn't thinking of the Cubs' title drought when he created the Emil Verban Society. The club was not about winning or losing. It was about playing the game at the highest level, and occasionally about baseball, too. □

Can the Cubs repeat their magical 2016 run?
Join the discussion on Twitter by using **#SIPointAfter** and following **@Rosenberg_Mike**

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